

Tribal Community Response When a Woman Is Missing: A Toolkit for Action

Coping with the disappearance of a loved one or community member is very difficult. The fact that American Indian and Alaska Native women experience higher rates of domestic violence and sexual assault than any other population of women in the United States has broad ramifications. One consequence of this reality is that domestic and sexual violence occurs on a spectrum of abusive behavior and can include abduction and murder. If a woman you know is missing, taking immediate action is very important. The quicker you respond, the faster she may be located and provided the help needed.

Is the disappearance voluntary?

One important factor to consider in preparing to respond is whether the disappearance is voluntary. A woman may be missing because she intentionally decided to cut ties to family and friends to avoid future harm to herself and loved ones. A woman may have decided, based on their specific circumstances, that the safest option is to leave and place herself, and possibly children, beyond the reach of her abuser. Disconnecting from family, friends, and community is a dramatic and life-changing decision and does not occur without significant reasons, one of which may be prevention of further abuse.

Missing because of force and violence?

The harsh reality is that many Native women who are victimized by domestic violence disappear, are abducted, or are murdered by their abusers. The Department of Justice reports that Native women are stalked and murdered at higher rates than other populations of women in the United States.

The lack of adequate law enforcement in tribal communities increases the importance of communities being informed and prepared to immediately respond to a disappearance. The following actions may increase awareness of the steps to take and help prepare tribal communities to respond during this very difficult time.

Why develop a response before confronted with a disappearance?

The disappearance of every Native woman requires an immediate response. The hours and minutes following a disappearance count. In order to respond immediately to a disappearance, it is recommended that advocacy programs develop a protocol ahead of time for when a woman goes missing. The development of a protocol will allow programs to

understand how to contact law enforcement agencies and other important steps. In developing a protocol, programs and organizations might consider the actions, issues, and concerns discussed below.

Should law enforcement be contacted? By phone or in-person?

Contact the local law enforcement where the disappearance occurred as soon as possible. The law enforcement agency will differ from tribe to tribe and in some cases multiple agencies will need to be contacted. This might include tribal law enforcement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the FBI, county police, and in Alaska the village public safety officer and state trooper, or a combination of these agencies. In addition, based on the circumstances, notifying tribal law enforcement in the home community of the missing woman might also be important. While many Native women live away from the community they consider home, they stay in touch and reach out to family and friends. When contacting law enforcement, provide as much detail as possible that could help establish the identity of the missing person. Write down the names of the people you speak to and request copies of any documents completed, including the missing persons report.

Why document and track events? Dates and times are important

The steps you take and contacts you make with law enforcement are very important to document. Keeping a journal will help you remember conversations with law enforcement and other agencies. This process makes an already difficult situation less stressful, and writing down the dates and times, names and telephone numbers of everyone you speak to will be highly valuable. It is also recommended to complete a calendar at the end of each day of the events or developments.

Why issue an alert?

A press release, radio announcement, Facebook post can alert the community

Informing, maintaining, and increasing public awareness of the disappearance is very important. The alert, bulletin, or flier circulated broadens the number of people who can help locate the missing woman. The alert should provide basic information about the person and how to report any information to the law enforcement agency or community member serving as a contact person.

Why organize community actions?

A vigil, search, justice walk, or march provides a positive anchor for family and community to support the woman who is missing

Many tribal communities are closely related and organized based upon family relationships and clans with long histories dating back over generations. Respect, prayer, and ceremonies are strengths of tribal communities, and often vigils and similar

events are held for the person who has disappeared. These actions also support the family and those left behind during a very difficult time. Justice walks and marches are common in the effort to increase the response of law enforcement and also hold local and federal law enforcement accountable for, in some cases, a failed response. In the disappearances of many Native women, it has been the families or community members who have conducted a search for their loved one. Unfortunately, in some cases, the walks and marches for justice are the only closure a family might have after a Native woman goes missing.

Take care of yourself and loved ones

In organizing to respond to issues concerning missing and murdered indigenous women, NIWRC encourages each person to remember self-care. Addressing the reality of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women is very difficult and can create high levels of stress. Stay connected to friends and family. Rely on your tribal beliefs and practices for support as a foundation for these efforts.

Important Steps to Take When a Native Woman Goes Missing

