

California tribes seek support for Tribe-Centered solutions to end the MMIP crisis

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On Tuesday, February 7, the Yurok Tribe and Tribes from across the state gathered for the first-ever MMIP Day of Action at the California State Capitol to advocate for tribally proposed solutions that address the crisis of missing and murdered indigenous people.

The solutions include two important pieces of legislation and a regional funding request for Northern, Central and Southern California tribes, which have long been excluded from many state and federal programs.

“California tribes have united to combat the MMIP crisis, which has weighed heavy on the hearts of every Native person in the state for far too long. The time for action is now,” said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “We are asking the state legislature to support a series of solutions that will help us prevent MMIP cases and keep our children safe.”

“The devastating issue of MMIP has caused untold tragedy that often becomes long lingering ripples of grief and further tragedy. We can reduce the number of cases through greater collaboration by law enforcement, tribal communities, mental health and other service providers to ensure that victims and their loved ones receive the support and attention they need to overcome these acts of violence. This issue remains a priority for me and others in the Native American Legislative Caucus; we want California at the forefront in confronting this issue,” added Assemblymember James C. Ramos.

Hundreds of tribal leaders, Native American advocates, affected families and tribal community members will be attending the first MMIP Day of Action in state history. The MMIP Day of Action will begin with light refreshments at 10am and a news briefing at 10:30am. Speakers include: California Assemblymember James C. Ramos, Yurok Chairman Joseph James, Assemblymember Robert Rivas, Wilton Rancheria Chairman Jesus Tarango, Jamul Indian Village Chairwoman Erica Pinto, Paskenta Band of the Nomlaki Indians Chairman Andrew Alejandre, Picayune Rancheria of the Chukchansi Indians Chairwoman Janet Bill, Senator Scott Wilk, Assemblymember Marie Waldron, Assemblymember Eloise Reyes, Director of the California DOJ’s Office of Native American Affairs Merri Lopez-Kiefer, MMIP Survivor Joanna Saubel, Marlena Alva, MMIP family member, Foster youth Olivia Shortbull, San Manuel Band of Mission Indians Youth Raven Casas, and Indigenous Justice Executive Director and MMIP Advocate Morning Star Gali. The news briefing will be followed by an MMIP walk, cultural demonstrations and community engagement activities.

Most, if not all California tribes are contending with MMIP crises. Tribal leaders across the state are calling for an historic investment of \$200 million to build programs and services that prevent girls, women and people from becoming missing or murdered and meet pressing needs in tribal communities. The proposal will bolster tribally led response plans, law enforcement and public health programs in Northern, Central and Southern California. It also calls for legislation to change broken laws and policies.

Building on the recent passage of the Feather Alert and Department of Justice Law Enforcement Assistance bills, the first piece of legislation is AB 44 (Tribal Public Safety). Introduced by California Assembly Member James C. Ramos, the bill seeks to grant tribal police state peace officer status. The bill will give qualified tribal police officers parity with state law enforcement as well as the ability to enforce all state laws and file cases in state courts. It will also provide tribal law enforcement and tribal courts access to the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (CLETS). The computer network contains FBI and DMV-administered databases, criminal histories and many other essential records. The bill will benefit all California residents by increasing the number of highly trained peace officers available to protect and serve communities.

The second bill, also introduced by Assembly Member Ramos, AB 273 (Protecting and Locating Foster Children Missing from Care) will require counties and courts to notify Tribes, key family members and attorneys when a child is missing from foster care. It will also require a judicial hearing when a child or non-minor dependent in foster care is missing, to ensure the child is located and returned to a safe and appropriate environment. Native children in the foster care system are disproportionately more at risk of becoming MMIP victims.

“The Yurok Tribe strongly encourages the state legislature to pass both bills,” said Chairman James

In the US, California ranks in the top 10 in terms of the quantity of MMIP cases that occur in the state on an annual basis. The Golden State also has 110 federally recognized tribes and the largest Native American population of any state in the country.

“Within rural tribal and inner-city communities, there is a dire need across the state to invest in women, girls and gender non-binary/non-confirming peoples potential, advance their rights, and address the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous peoples (MMIP). We are committed to working for structural change and transformation of the dominant narratives in which our stories are told, narratives that blame and further marginalize system impacted Indigenous peoples,” said Indigenous Justice Executive Director Morning Star Gali.

In October of 2022, the Yurok Tribe hosted the 1st Annual Statewide Tribal Summit on MMIP. The summit served as a catalyst to unite California’s tribal leaders, justice systems, MMIP survivors and Native American advocates around MMIP. Within days of the watershed event, tribal leaders started meeting on a monthly basis to develop and implement coordinated action plans to confront facets of the MMIP crisis. The funding proposal and MMIP Day of Action are an extension of this work.