

Yurok Tribe Hires Investigator to Pursue MMIP Cases

March 24, 2023



The Yurok Tribe recently hired an accomplished law enforcement professional to investigate existing and new cases involving Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) in California's North Coast region.

MMIP Investigator Julia Oliveira brings to the new position 25 years of relevant experience. The Wyandotte Tribe citizen spent two decades with the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO), where she occupied a wide variety of positions, ranging from patrol deputy to school resource officer. During her career, she conducted missing persons and child sexual abuse investigations. Oliveira continues to serve on HCSO's Crisis Intervention Team and is its longest serving member. For the last four years, Oliveira led the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribal Police Department. She also occupies a leadership position within the United States Office of Violence Against Women's Task Force on Research on Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women.

"I applied for the MMIP investigator position because I am very passionate about this subject," Oliveira said. "Throughout the State of California, very few resources are allocated to cases involving missing and

murdered Indigenous people. I was very excited when I saw the opportunity to be the person who is solely focused on finding missing Indigenous people.”

“We are so fortunate that Julia decided to accept the investigator position. She has the ideal background for this important job,” said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “She will help bring closure and justice to the families of missing tribal citizens. The new investigator will be engaged in our MMIP prevention effort too.”

Oliveira is the first fully dedicated tribal MMIP investigator in the State of California. She works within the Yurok Office of the Tribal Prosecutor, which is part of the Tribe’s MMIP response team. The investigator will conduct inquiries into current and cold MMIP cases. Prior to accepting the position, Oliveira served on the Office of the Tribal Prosecutor’s MMIP Roundtable. The roundtable group meets on a regular basis to discuss solutions to the MMIP crisis and is currently comprised of the following tribes: Yurok Tribe, Hoopa Valley Tribe, Trinidad Rancheria, Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria and Quartz Valley Tribe. It is open to all tribes in the region.

The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians awarded the Yurok Tribe a grant to hire the MMIP investigator. In addition to funding the investigator position, the \$350,000 grant will support the creation of a database that will be employed to analyze patterns in missing persons cases and identify potential perpetrators. A portion of the San Manuel award will be invested in billboard space to raise awareness about specific cases. It will also support the deployment of canine handlers, human remains detection dogs and ground-penetrating radar when necessary.

In December of 2021, the Yurok Tribe declared an MMIP emergency in response to a spike in MMIP cases in Northern California, including the disappearance of Hupa citizen Emmilee Risling. Risling was last seen on the Yurok Reservation on October 14, 2021. The declaration mobilized a multidisciplinary team to build the Tribe’s capacity to confront the many facets of this complex and indelible crisis. The Tribe formed the prosecutor’s office and later hired a policy analyst to advocate for targeted legislation at the state and federal levels. In 2022, the Tribe started sponsoring state legislation to address specific aspects of the MMIP crisis.

In August of 2022, the California legislature passed the Feather Alert bill. The Yurok Tribe-sponsored bill established a system to get the word out when Native people are reported missing under unusual circumstances or are at risk. In October of 2022, the Tribe hosted the first Statewide Tribal MMIP Summit. Nearly 300 tribal leaders, tribal police and impacted families from every corner of the state, as well as state legislators and law enforcement, attended the summit.

Earlier this year, the Tribe made a \$200 million budget request to the State of California to combat the MMIP crisis. The proposal aims to support MMIP response plans and culturally informed prevention work in Northern, Central and Southern California. In February of 2023, the Yurok Tribe and U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) announced a new MMIP pilot project, which is part of USMS’s Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Initiative. The cooperative project brings together personnel from the Yurok Tribe, including the Yurok Tribal Police Department and Yurok Office of the Tribal Prosecutor, and USMS to share information,

identify goals, and develop strategies for improving public safety for the Tribe, its citizens, and the broader community. The government-to-government partnership with USMS will also enhance the new MMIP investigation program.

“We hope to leverage our relationship with the US Marshals to build out our investigative program,” said Yurok Prosecutor Rosemary Deck.

California has the fifth highest number of MMIP cases in the US.

Nearly every one of the state’s 110 federally recognized tribes are experiencing MMIP crises.

On February 7, 2023 the Yurok Tribe organized the first MMIP Day of Action at the California capitol. More than 500 tribal leaders, tribal citizens from all over California and MMIP survivors participated in the day of action.

Nearly a dozen democratic and republican state legislators also attend the historic event. The Tribe put on the MMIP Day of Action to educate lawmakers about MMIP and promote two proposed bills. Introduced by California Assembly Member James C. Ramos and sponsored by the Tribe, AB 44 (Tribal Public Safety) seeks to grant tribal police state peace officer status. The bill 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.

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.

For more information on the bills, please visit <https://www.yuroktribe.org/>