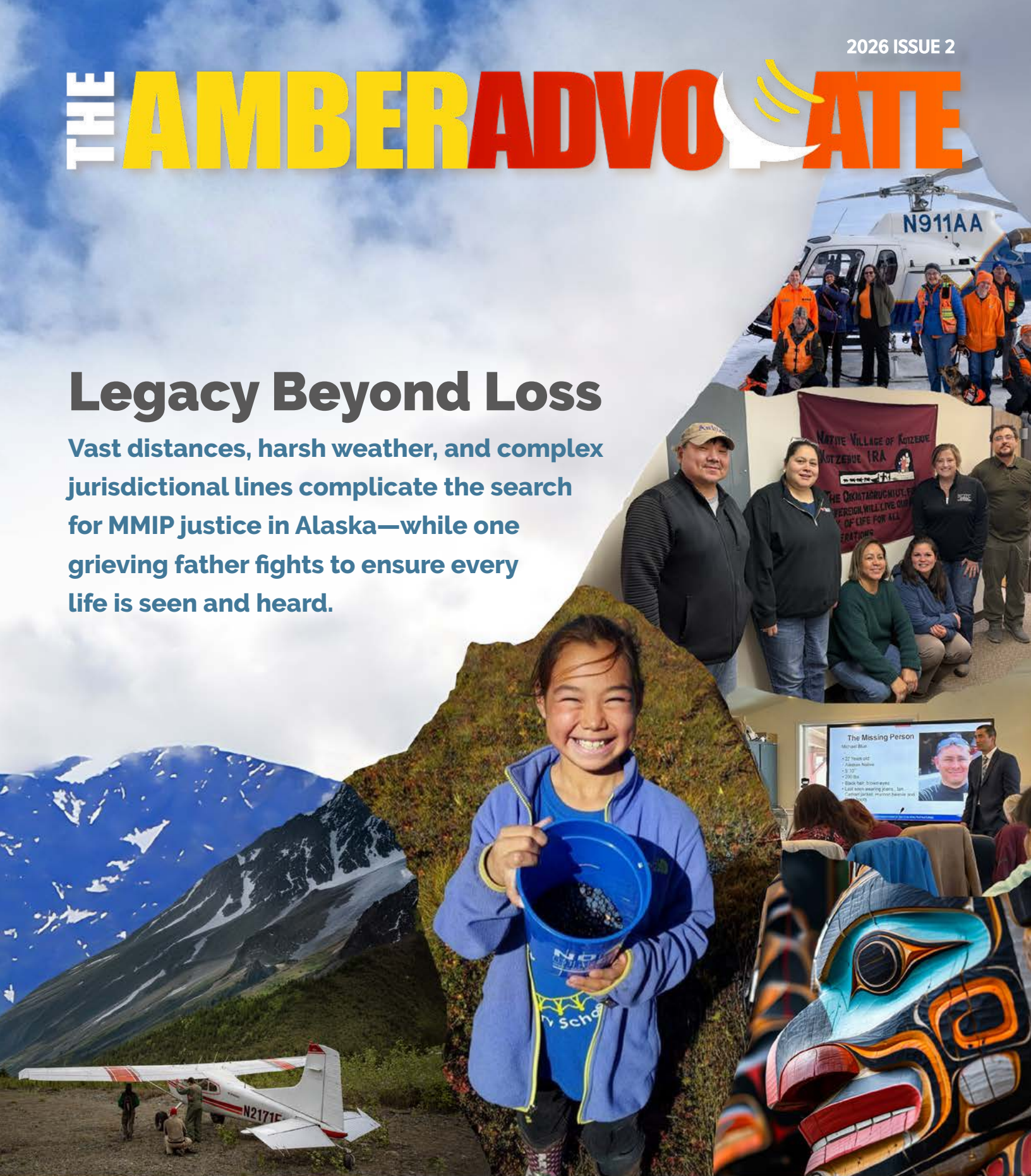


THE AMBER ADVOCATE

Legacy Beyond Loss

Vast distances, harsh weather, and complex jurisdictional lines complicate the search for MMIP justice in Alaska—while one grieving father fights to ensure every life is seen and heard.



OJJDP

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Above: Ashley Johnson-Barr's gravesite is awash in purple, her favorite color. Right: Ashley shows off a pail of freshly picked blueberries.

Legacy Beyond Loss

The Girl Who Changed the Conversation

Ashley Johnson-Barr's death exposed Alaska's missing and murdered Indigenous people crisis—and the system struggling to respond.

On a quiet September evening in 2018, 10-year-old Ashley Johnson-Barr walked to a nearby park in Kotzebue, Alaska, to meet a friend—and never made it home.

"Her legacy will live on through educating others," says her father, Walter "Scotty" Barr. "Keep your children close. Talk to them. Do what you can to keep them safe."

Kotzebue is a predominantly Iñupiat community of about 3,200 residents, located above the Arctic Circle in the northwest part of the state—a place accessible

Life in the ‘Last Frontier’

Living in a Native village in Alaska means inhabiting one of the most beautiful—and demanding—places in the United States. Scattered across tundra, coastline, and river delta, many of these communities are reachable only by small plane, boat, or snow machine. Weather dictates everything. A winter storm can ground flights for days, delaying groceries, mail, medical appointments, and even emergency evacuations.

Isolation drives up costs. Nearly all goods are flown or barged in, making everyday necessities expensive. Milk and fresh produce can cost double or triple what they do in the Lower 48. Heating fuel and electricity strain household budgets during long, dark winters. Jobs are often limited to the school, Tribal government, clinic, or seasonal work, prompting some young people to leave for regional hubs like Anchorage or Fairbanks.

Infrastructure can be basic. In some villages, residents haul water from a central source and use “honey buckets” instead of flush toilets. Internet access may be slow. Housing shortages and overcrowding are persistent challenges.

And yet, the story is not defined by hardship alone. Alaska Native villages are anchored by strong kinship networks, deep cultural knowledge, and subsistence traditions that bind people to land and sea. Salmon drying on racks, whaling crews launching at first light, elders teaching language and story; these rhythms shape daily life as much as the challenges do. For many residents, the connection to culture, family, and homeland is not simply a reason to stay. It is the reason everything else is endured.

only by air or water. It’s a closely knit region where neighbors know one another, where children play freely in the long summer light, and where the idea of a child vanishing feels unthinkable.

Yet within hours of Ashley’s disappearance, that sense of safety was shattered. Residents fanned out across tundra and shoreline, and hundreds of volunteers joined the search.

Eight days later, Ashley was found dead on a remote stretch of tundra more than 2 miles from the playground where she was last seen. She had been sexually assaulted and strangled.

“I screamed. I cried. It’s a moment that never leaves you,” Barr recalls. “Then I had to tell Ashley’s mother, her siblings, our family. That part was unbearable.”

Ashley’s death shocked Alaska. But it did something more: It forced the state, and the nation, to confront a painful truth long known within Indigenous communities. Her story was not an isolated tragedy. It was part of a pattern that many Alaska Natives were keeping silent about.

“No more silence,” Barr says.

A Crisis Hidden in Plain Sight

For decades, Indigenous communities across the United States and Canada have raised alarms about the disproportionate rates at which Native people—particularly women and girls—go missing or are killed.

In Alaska, those disparities are especially stark. The state is home to 229 federally recognized Tribes, and Alaska Natives make up about 19% of the population. Yet they account for a disproportionately high share of homicide victims and missing persons cases. (*See page 7.*)

Advocates refer to this epidemic as the missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) crisis. It is not defined by a single



case, but by a troubling pattern: disappearances that receive little media attention, investigations slowed by geography or jurisdictional complexity, and families left searching for answers.

Ashley's case broke through that silence. "It made people feel not as safe here as they once felt," Barr says.

Her death also underscored the role of substance abuse, a factor in many violent crimes in Alaska. Barr says his daughter's killer, Peter Wilson, admitted to being on a drinking binge at the time of the attack. Wilson would be sentenced to 99 years in prison.

Barr now speaks openly about the need for prevention, treatment, and accountability. He works as a compassion-centered trainer for the Southcentral Foundation of Kotzebue. He also serves as a surviving family member Associate for the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College. As part of that work, Barr's insights are molding

trainings hosted by NCJTC's AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) and its AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC) initiative.

Jurisdiction, Geography, and Delays

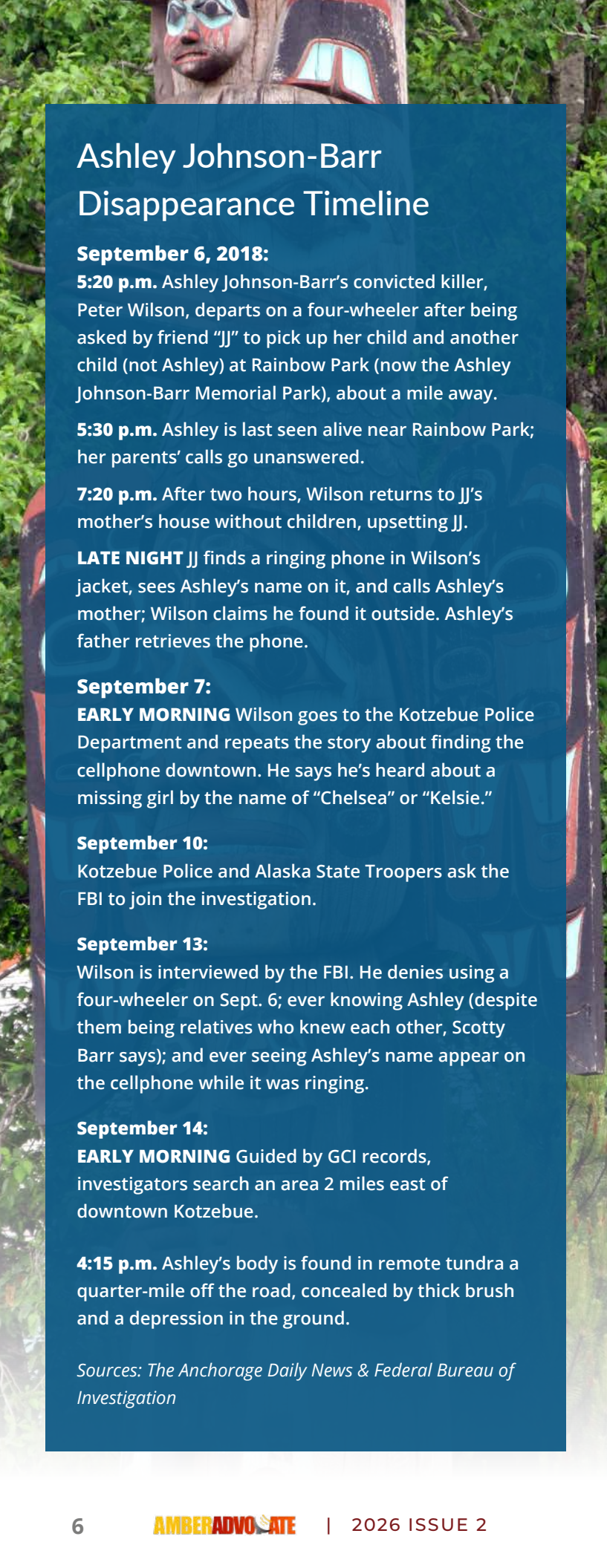
To understand why cases like Ashley's can be challenging to investigate, it is necessary to understand Alaska itself, not just its daunting geography but its legal landscape.

"Alaska is a Public Law 280 state," says Mary Ferguson, a Tribal court judge for the Sitka Tribe. The MMIP advocate, who started her career in law enforcement, is a member of Alaska's Tlingit people. "What that means is that Tribes don't have criminal jurisdiction. We can only handle civil matters."

That distinction is critical and widely misunderstood. "When someone goes missing, families often turn to the Tribe," Ferguson says. "But legally, we can't step in the way people think we can." (*See "ANCSA and PL-280 at a Glance" in the online story.*)



1. Ashley Johnson-Barr, left, and sister Amber Barr
2. Scotty Barr, Mary Ferguson, Janell Rasmussen, and Tyesha Wood at Ashley Johnson-Barr Memorial Park in Kotzebue
3. Sitka class participants get a warm welcome
4. AIIIC Associates Matthew Hall and Julian Garcia instructing in Chickaloon
5. MMIP-Tanana Chiefs dedication sign in Fairbanks
6. Scotty Barr, Saima Chase, Tyesha Wood, Mary Ferguson, Janell Rasmussen, and Steven Rexford in Kotzebue



Ashley Johnson-Barr Disappearance Timeline

September 6, 2018:

5:20 p.m. Ashley Johnson-Barr's convicted killer, Peter Wilson, departs on a four-wheeler after being asked by friend "JJ" to pick up her child and another child (not Ashley) at Rainbow Park (now the Ashley Johnson-Barr Memorial Park), about a mile away.

5:30 p.m. Ashley is last seen alive near Rainbow Park; her parents' calls go unanswered.

7:20 p.m. After two hours, Wilson returns to JJ's mother's house without children, upsetting JJ.

LATE NIGHT JJ finds a ringing phone in Wilson's jacket, sees Ashley's name on it, and calls Ashley's mother; Wilson claims he found it outside. Ashley's father retrieves the phone.

September 7:

EARLY MORNING Wilson goes to the Kotzebue Police Department and repeats the story about finding the cellphone downtown. He says he's heard about a missing girl by the name of "Chelsea" or "Kelsie."

September 10:

Kotzebue Police and Alaska State Troopers ask the FBI to join the investigation.

September 13:

Wilson is interviewed by the FBI. He denies using a four-wheeler on Sept. 6; ever knowing Ashley (despite them being relatives who knew each other, Scotty Barr says); and ever seeing Ashley's name appear on the cellphone while it was ringing.

September 14:

EARLY MORNING Guided by GCI records, investigators search an area 2 miles east of downtown Kotzebue.

4:15 p.m. Ashley's body is found in remote tundra a quarter-mile off the road, concealed by thick brush and a depression in the ground.

Sources: The Anchorage Daily News & Federal Bureau of Investigation

Unlike much of the Lower 48, Alaska does not operate under a traditional "Indian Country" framework. There are no reservations in the same sense (barring one example), no Tribal police forces with broad criminal authority, and no casino revenue streams funding public safety services.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) fundamentally reshaped land ownership and governance in the 1970s, creating a system that continues to affect how crimes are investigated. "All of that impacts what happens when someone goes missing," says Ferguson. (*See "ANCSA and PL-280 at a Glance" in the online story.*)

The result is a system that can be difficult to navigate—not only for families, but for professionals working within it.

To help others alleviate uncertainty, Ferguson volunteers to help families struggling with MMIP issues while also serving as a NCJTC Associate who educates law enforcement professionals about the complexities faced by Alaska Natives. For AATTAP-NCJTC she is moderator of two webinars that focus on Ashley's case. (See "Missing in Alaska: The Webinars," page 9.)

Even when jurisdiction is clear, the physical realities of Alaska present enormous challenges. The state spans more than 665,000 square miles, more than twice the size of Texas. Within its extremely remote environs, many communities are accessible only by bush plane or boat. Law enforcement coverage is thin, and response times can stretch for hours, or days.

"When someone disappears in an Alaska remote area, with no road system, there could be a delayed response from law enforcement assigned to these vast regions, and specialized investigators can be hundreds of miles away," says Tyesha Wood, Program Manager for AMBER Alert in Indian Country.

Weather adds another layer of unpredictability. "If conditions are good, it might take three

hours by plane,” Wood says. “If weather prevents flying, it could take up to three days by boat.”

Ferguson says these delays are compounded by infrastructure limitations. “There’s only one crime lab for the entire state,” she says. “Evidence, even digital evidence like cellphones, sometimes has to be sent thousands of miles away for analysis, as was the case for Ashley’s phone.”

All of this takes time. And as Wood says: “In MMIP cases, those first hours can determine outcomes.”

Ashley’s case reflected those realities. While local responders and volunteers mobilized immediately, additional resources took days to arrive.

Barr says forensic analysis of Ashley’s phone ultimately helped locate her, but it required time and specialized capabilities not always readily available in rural Alaska. “This is not unique to Ashley’s case,” Wood says. “It’s a structural issue.” For families, those delays can feel unbearable. “Families deserve urgency,” Ferguson says. “They deserve answers.” But she also emphasizes the complexity facing law enforcement.

“I want people to understand both sides,” Ferguson says. “These cases are extreme and complex. Resources are limited. Distances are vast. The constantly changing weather alone can stop searches entirely.”

Even when agencies are doing everything possible, Ferguson says, it may not feel that way to families waiting for answers.

“Sometimes people are doing everything they can, and yet it still doesn’t feel like enough,” Ferguson says. That’s because

the system itself is stretched to its limits due to staffing shortages. (For more about law enforcement work in Alaska, see page 10.) And that tension between urgency and limitation sits at the heart of many MMIP cases.

Beyond geography, legal complexity can further slow investigations. Depending on where a crime occurs and who is involved, authority may fall to Tribal, state, or federal agencies. Those distinctions are often invisible to families, but their consequences are not. “This fragmentation can slow investigations and create confusion,” Wood says.

Data gaps have also long obscured the scope of the crisis. For years, cases involving Indigenous victims were underreported or inconsistently tracked. “But without reliable data, it’s difficult to allocate resources or identify patterns,” Ferguson says.

Advocates say these systemic challenges are compounded by a history of mistrust between Indigenous communities and institutions. And when cases receive limited attention from law enforcement or the media, mistrust can deepen.

A Community in Grief and Action

In Kotzebue, Ashley’s death left a lasting scar. The search for her had united the community. The outcome brought collective grief and resolve.

Vigils were held. Families shared stories of their own missing loved ones, many of which had gone unheard. Ashley’s name became a rallying point and March 12 (her birthday) was officially designated by the state legislature as Ashley Johnson-Barr Day.

Continues on next page



84.3% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) women have experienced violence in their lifetime, while **56.1%** of AI/AN women have experienced sexual violence.

Despite being only **19%** of Alaska’s population, Native women represent **47%** of rape victims and are **250%** over-represented in domestic violence cases.

Alaska accounts for a disproportionate share of the **4,200** unsolved nationwide MMIP cases.

AN people make up about **40%** of the United States’ 575 federally recognized Tribes.

Sources: Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA); compiled from multiple sources by National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

Working Toward More Just MMIP Investigations

Effective law enforcement response to the missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP) crisis requires moving beyond standard procedures toward active coordination and trust-building.

- **Acknowledge the Scale:** Alaska Native women and girls are disproportionately affected, though men and elders are also victims. Understanding this systemic context is vital.
- **Turn Awareness Into Action:** Awareness only protects families when combined with cultural respect, specialized training, and rapid collaboration.
- **Respond Immediately:** Never assume a disappearance is voluntary. In rural Alaska, distance and weather already cause delays; do not add to them by waiting to engage search resources.
- **Prioritize Accurate Data:** Ensure cases are entered into the NCIC quickly with correct racial and Tribal identification to prevent the historical issue of misclassification.
- **Act Despite Jurisdictional Complexity:** Do not let confusion over Tribal, state, or federal authority stall an investigation. Initiate the response first, then coordinate with agencies like the FBI or State Troopers.
- **Build Community Trust:** Partner with Tribal leaders and provide families with regular updates, even when there is no new information.
- **Partner With Families:** Treat families as essential sources of information rather than obstacles. Avoid victim-blaming language and take their concerns seriously.

Check Out the AMBER Alert in Indian Country Website for More MMIP-related Investigative Training and Resources.

Across Alaska, similar MMIP-focused conversations began to emerge. What had once been spoken quietly was now being said aloud.

Her case helped prompt change, including expanded rapid-response efforts for missing children and increased federal attention to MMIP cases. Alaska also established a task force focused on the crisis, with an emphasis on improving data collection, coordination, and support for rural communities. (See *“Ashley’s Legacy in Alaska” in the online story.*)

The changes did not solve the problem, but they marked a shift “from awareness to action,” Barr says.

One of the defining features of the MMIP crisis is invisibility. Many victims’ names are never widely known. Ashley’s is. “Names matter,” Wood says. “When names fade, so does urgency.”

Awareness, she says, creates pressure—and pressure leads to resources. “These stories matter. People are still going missing. When we keep telling these stories, it helps the entire system respond.”

Ashley’s story resonated beyond Alaska because it challenged assumptions about who is at risk. She was a child, not an adult. She was playing in a park, not living on the margins.

Barr works to ensure people remember Ashley as more than a victim. “She was a kind, loving girl,”

Missing in Alaska: The Webinars

Join us for a powerful two-part webinar series exploring the challenges of responding to abducted and missing child cases in Alaska. Using the tragic case of Ashley Johnson-Barr as a catalyst for change, these sessions highlight the critical need for community coordination, law enforcement training, and the impact of the AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC) program.

Part 1: The Case & Response (Recorded)

Discover the investigative hurdles and the importance of rapid, coordinated action in rural Alaska. **Available now on-demand.**

Part 2: A Path Forward (Recorded)

Delve deeper into the systemic changes needed with a panel discussion led by AIIC Associate and Alaska Native Tribal Court Judge Mary Ferguson. **Available now on-demand.**

Find AMBER Alert in Indian Country Trainings and More at AMBERAdvocate.org/AIIC

he says. "She loved playing outside, going to church, swimming, and basketball. She loved picking berries, and purple was her favorite color."
(Read Barr's moving online letter to Ashley to mark what would have been her 18th birthday.)

The Work That Remains

Despite increased awareness, factors driving the MMIP crisis continue to persist: geographic isolation, limited resources, and jurisdictional complexity.

Advocates emphasize that awareness is only the beginning. "Families often don't know what to do first," Ferguson says. "They don't know who to call or what steps to take."

In some cases, she says, families feel as though nothing is happening at all. "I've helped families start searches, connect people to resources and push agencies to act," she says. "Families are desperate, and they deserve someone who understands the system."

Helping families understand how to advocate for themselves can make a critical difference. "That knowledge matters," Ferguson says. "It can help bring attention and resources when they're needed most."

Ashley's life was brief, but her impact endures. Her story brought national attention and helped change how missing-person cases are approached in Alaska. And it gave voice to families who had long been searching for answers.

"Every person matters. Every story matters," says AMBER Alert in Indian Country Associate Alica Wildcatt. "Every life deserves to be seen."

Barr agrees. "Ashley's life will continue to have meaning as long as we honor it through action," he says. "We need better training, stronger laws, and more prevention, not just awareness."



May 5 is the **National Day of Awareness** for Missing & Murdered Indigenous People (#MMIP) / Women & Girls (#MMIWG) in the United States.

March 12 is officially recognized as **Ashley Johnson-Barr Day** ("Wear Purple Day") in Alaska. Held on Ashley's birthday, the day is meant to raise awareness about violence against children and community safety.

Call of the Wild

Lieutenant Benjamin Endres focuses on saving lives in one of this country's most challenging terrains.

Alaska is a land of staggering scale and beauty, but its rugged terrain is as dangerous as it is scenic. For Lieutenant Benjamin Endres of the Alaska State Troopers (AST), the “Last Frontier” isn’t just a backdrop—it’s a massive, 665,000-square-mile jurisdiction where the environment itself is often the greatest threat to life.

Based in Anchorage as the Statewide Search and Rescue Coordinator for the AST, Endres oversees a complex web of logistics in a state that lacks traditional counties or sheriff’s offices. From coordinating canine teams for missing persons in remote Yup’ik villages to managing the state’s AMBER Alert system, his work is a race against both time and the rapidly shifting Alaskan weather.

Originally a law enforcement veteran from Northern Indiana, Endres moved to Alaska in 2008, seeking the ultimate professional challenge. Today, he sits at the center of a vital support network, balancing the roles of emergency management liaison and communications coordinator to keep Alaskans safe in one of the world’s most unforgiving climates. (“The environment in Alaska kills a lot of people,” he says.)

You spent 20 years in law enforcement in Indiana. What drew you to the Alaska State Troopers?

I was born and raised in northern Indiana and did about 20 years in law enforcement there before coming up to Alaska at the end



“Geography and weather are our biggest masters. Many communities are completely off-road and rely on air, riverboat, or snow machine. If a child goes missing in a village that doesn’t have a trooper post, we have to fly someone in.”

Lieutenant Benjamin Endres

Statewide Search and Rescue Coordinator
Alaska State Troopers

of 2008. My uncle was a Michigan State Trooper and my childhood hero; he gave me my initial interest in rural law enforcement. When I was reaching the end of my time in Indiana, I started thinking about where the biggest, most challenging, most rural place would be to finish my career. Alaska was the answer.

How does the structure of law enforcement in Alaska differ from the “Lower 48”?

It is very different because Alaska does not have counties, sheriff’s offices, or deputies. We have boroughs, but many areas are “unorganized,” meaning there is no local borough government at all. Troopers provide complete law enforcement services for everything outside of traditional city limits. In

remote posts like Glennallen, you're the only game in town for an area as big as some states. You have to be a mix of everything—think Andy Griffith-style sheriff to forensic investigator to prisoner transport officer.

What are the primary logistical hurdles when a search and rescue call comes in from a remote village?

Geography and weather are our biggest masters. Many communities are completely off-road and rely on air, riverboat, or snow machine (or "snowmobile" as they're called in the Lower 48). If a child goes missing in a village that doesn't have a trooper post, we have to fly someone in. However, our pilots need Visual Flight Rules (VFR) visibility; if there is blowing snow or freezing rain, they simply cannot fly. This can cause delays of several days before we can even get boots on the ground.

You also manage the state's AMBER Alert system. Why is the criteria for these alerts so strict?

In my three years in this position, we've only had two AMBER Alerts, and thankfully both kids were recovered successfully. We keep the criteria strict—requiring a confirmed abduction and imminent danger—specifically to avoid "alert fatigue." We want people to take it seriously when their phone goes off at 2 a.m. Alaska is also limited in how it can broadcast these; for example, we only have two highway signs in the entire state capable of displaying emergency messages, and both are in the Anchorage area.

Can you explain the role of the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) and how they bridge the law enforcement gap in rural areas?

The **VPSO program** was started to provide a physical safety presence in small villages that are hard for Troopers to staff. The state funds it, but the officers—I think we have about 80 of them now—work for Native corporations or boroughs. They're trained in law enforcement, first aid, and firefighting. It's a very tough job—it takes a unique individual to be the

Alaska State Troopers in Fairbanks worked with the volunteer search team PAWS to conduct helicopter operation training and familiarization flights with the handlers and dogs.



law enforcement representative in a village of only 300 or 400 people where everyone knows you. And often there's just one VPSO—if even that—available to serve a vast area.

With communication a hurdle, how do you stay in touch with officers in the field? And locate cell phones?

Communication with my colleagues is one of my biggest responsibilities, and it's a constant struggle. In the "Rail Belt" near populated areas, we have good radio coverage. But in Western Alaska, a trooper on a snow machine

often has zero radio communication between villages. Even cell service is problematic; most villages use a provider called GCI, which isn't always compatible with AT&T or Verizon. When someone goes missing, we can't "triangulate" a phone to within a few feet like you can in Los Angeles; we're lucky if we can get it within a mile of a single cell tower.

What other challenges do you face?

Communication delays can pose a problem when people think, as some still do, that you have to wait 24 hours before reporting someone missing. We do our best to try to educate people about that. We also face perpetual staffing shortages despite our best efforts to recruit people into taking good-paying positions up here. The number of new recruits can't keep up with the number of retirements.

What's a typical day like for you?

Anything but typical. They're very different and challenging in their own way. When I'm not coordinating logistics for search and rescue teams—for example figuring out where they'll spend the night (often in sleeping bags at village schools) or trying to line up a helicopter—I'm running back and forth from our radio technicians to get portable radios fixed.

Tell us about the significance of search and rescue (SAR) teams in Alaska.

We have a lot of volunteer search and rescue

groups, which we're grateful for, especially because they operate at a professional level. Coordinating their help is a big part of my job. The Alaska State Troopers are statutorily responsible for leading search and rescue (SAR) operations statewide, and we conduct more than 450 missions each year. All troopers are trained in SAR and work alongside more than 1,100 volunteers, as well as multiple agencies and organizations. SAR teams are deployed along with aircraft, vessels, ground teams, and canines to locate lost or injured residents and visitors. Once we've activated them for a mission, they get covered by the AST for workman's comp should anybody be injured. And then we reimburse them for their expenses for travel and food. So we really count on them.

What is the most rewarding part of this work for you?

In search and rescue, you deal with a lot of tragedy, like unrecovered bodies from avalanches, that really wear on you. But the "wins" give us fuel to move forward. Last week, a 15-year-old fell 40 feet in the mountains and broke his back. Seeing the video of him being successfully hoisted into a U.S. Air Force helicopter by pararescuemen and knowing he's now recovering—that's what makes you want to get back out there and find the next person who needs help.



Village Public Safety Operations (VPSO)

VPSO was established in 1979 and was elevated to a standalone division of the Alaska Department of Public Safety in 2024. The division provides dedicated oversight and training for rural public safety and serves Alaska's most remote communities.

[**Read More About the VPSO**](#)



Arizona Department of Public Safety Alerts Coordinator Kelsey Commisso¹ (far left) addresses the media after the successful recovery of Violet C. (center) thanks to input from Hawaii's AMBER Alert Coordinator Amanda Leonard (right).

From Gray to Turquoise

When Hawaii needed help locating a missing child, Arizona deployed its Turquoise Alert for the first time—demonstrating how creativity and cross-state trust can save precious hours.

Nearly 3,000 miles and three time zones away, Hawaii's AMBER Alert Coordinator Amanda Leonard faced a daunting task: A 6-year-old Big Island girl named Violet was missing, and the best hope of finding her was in Arizona.

The parental custodial-interference case did not meet Hawaii's strict criteria for issuing a MAILE AMBER Alert, so Leonard expected her options in Arizona would be similarly limited to a be-on-the-lookout (BOLO) bulletin shared with law enforcement. What she didn't expect was an opportunity that would change the trajectory of the search—and set a precedent for a brand-new alerting tool.

The Backstory

After Violet was reported missing July 16, 2025, investigators learned her noncustodial mother, Sarah C., had flown with her from Kona to Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. After that, the trail went cold.

¹ Editor's Note: As of press time, Commisso was recently named Supervisor within the Arizona Counter Terrorism Information Center, where she continues to oversee its emergency alerting program.

By Tuesday, July 22, one fact was clear: Sarah had no legal authority to take Violet to the mainland. Investigators were increasingly concerned about the child's safety.

To locate her Arizona counterpart, Leonard turned to the AMBERAdvocate.org Partner Portal, maintained by the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program of the National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC). Her call reached the Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) Duty Office just as DPS Alerts Coordinator Kelsey Commisso was finishing her shift.

Leonard explained the situation. Hawaii was not requesting an AMBER Alert extension—no formal alert had been issued—but asked Arizona to circulate a BOLO to law enforcement. The FBI and Hawaii Police Department were already coordinating with Arizona investigators. And if Arizona had other ideas, she was open to them.

A New Option Emerges

From home, Commisso continued following the case as new details came in—and began to consider another possibility. Arizona had enacted the Turquoise Alert less than two weeks earlier. It had never been used. Could this case qualify?

There was already confusion about the new alert. Some assumed, based on its name, that it was limited to Indigenous missing persons. While that had been its original intent, the statute broadened during the legislative process to include all missing and endangered individuals under 65, while also recognizing the disproportionate impact of missing and murdered Indigenous people (MMIP).

The alert stems from “Emily’s Law,” Arizona House Bill 2281, created in memory of 14-year-old Emily Pike, a San Carlos Apache Tribal member found murdered after being reported missing in early 2025. The law was signed in May 2025 by Governor Katie Hobbs to improve responses to disappearances, particularly those involving Indigenous people.

Using the alert for a non-Native child—from as far away as Hawaii—would likely raise questions. But the criteria appeared to fit. Commisso called her supervisor, Sgt. Kim Love-Ness. They agreed: The case met the criteria and could be activated at Hawaii’s request.



61% of AMBER Alerts involve parental abductions. “But many cases fall into a gray area,” Leonard says. “It takes conversation and creativity to determine what tool can be used—versus no alert at all.”



We deeply respect the efforts of Governor Hobbs to provide critically needed public safety assistance for the 22 Tribes in Arizona. The new Turquoise Alert, also known as ‘Emily’s Law,’ will advance safety in Arizona not only within Tribal communities, but throughout the State of Arizona. Over the years, Tribal communities have faced the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous persons without advanced emergency systems in place and we see the Turquoise Alert as a proactive step in the right direction.

Paul Russell
President, Inter Tribal Council of Arizona

“We saw this as a chance to find Violet,” Commisso says, “and to educate the public about who the alert is actually intended for.”

A Sleepless Call

After a restless night, Commisso called Leonard early the next morning—unaware it was 4:29 a.m. in Hawaii. Leonard was awake. She hadn’t slept either.

Arizona's Turquoise Alert Criteria

The Arizona Department of Public Safety may issue a Turquoise Alert when all five criteria are met:

- 1 The missing person is under age 65.
- 2 Law enforcement has exhausted available local resources.
- 3 Law enforcement believes the person is in danger or otherwise in peril.
- 4 The disappearance involves unexplained or suspicious circumstances and is not solely a runaway situation (unless aggravating factors indicate danger).
- 5 Public dissemination of information could assist in safe recovery.

The opportunity was real, but the decision belonged to Hawaii investigators. "It's our alert," Commisso explains, "but it's their missing child case."

Leonard relayed the option to Hawaii Police Department command staff and the FBI. There was no guarantee they would proceed.

"Just because an alert exists doesn't mean activating it is the right call," Commisso says. "An alert has to help, not hinder, an investigation."

Hawaii ultimately agreed. Local leads were exhausted, and urgency was mounting. From that point on, Commisso and Leonard were in near-constant contact, navigating parallel chains of command across multiple time zones.

Their camaraderie wasn't accidental. Both had attended the National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium in Washington, D.C., earlier that year.

"Being connected through the NCJTC builds instant rapport," Leonard says.

Arizona's Turquoise Alert had gone live just six days before Violet was reported missing. Being its first activation carried weight.

"It would be a huge responsibility," Leonard recalls thinking, "one full of public scrutiny and media intensity."

First Turquoise Alert Unfolds

On Wednesday, July 23, Hawaii Police Department leadership, working closely with the FBI, approved activation of Arizona's Turquoise Alert.

"This is exactly what the Turquoise Alert is meant for—cases that don't meet AMBER Alert criteria but demand urgency," Commisso says. For example, Arizona had not issued an AMBER Alert since 2023. The threshold is intentionally high to avoid public desensitization. The gray space between "AMBER Alert" and "nothing at all" is where many cases fall—and where this alert was designed to operate.

Even before final approval, coordination was underway. Hawaii officials submitted documentation demonstrating the case met Arizona's criteria. Leadership within Arizona's DPS Counter Terrorism Information Center (Fusion Center), the Governor's Office, public information offices in both states, transportation divisions, dispatch centers, and child abduction response teams were notified.

At 7:01 p.m. Arizona time, the Turquoise Alert was sent to more than 10 million cell phones statewide. Minutes later, media outlets were notified.

"Everything appeared to be working," Commisso recalls. "Now we just needed the alert to help find Violet."

Continues on next page

She went to bed that night with her two cell phones within reach. Five hours later, one of them lit up.

Violet was safe. A public tip led law enforcement to a women's shelter in Cottonwood, Arizona, where at around 12:45 a.m., officers were able to locate the girl and her mother.

Sarah C. was taken into custody without incident on a felony custodial-interference warrant. Violet was soon reunited with her custodial father.

After the Adrenaline

"When I got the text that she'd been found, I teared up," Commisso says. "There was such relief. The adrenaline lasted for days."

"It's euphoric," Leonard adds. "You're happy for the child, the left-behind parent, and everyone who helped bring them home."

Commisso and Leonard had been in constant contact through the formation and dissemination of the Turquoise Alert and realized by now they shared a unique bond with each other.

In the hours that followed came media questions, public scrutiny, and continued education about what the Turquoise Alert is—and is not. But in that moment, none of it outweighed the outcome: The system had worked.

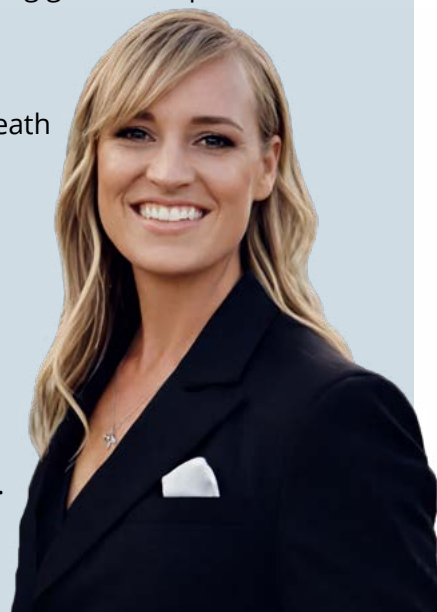
Arizona's first Turquoise Alert did more than help locate a missing child. It defined a new tool in real time, clarified its purpose, and demonstrated what can happen when two states—separated by thousands of miles and three time zones—trust each other enough to act. In the gray space between "AMBER Alert" and "nothing at all," a precedent had been set—and a child was home.

Meet the Press: Three Tips for Alert Coordinators

When Arizona DPS Alerts Coordinator Kelsey Commisso¹ (pictured below) stepped to the podium, it was her first live media event of that magnitude. "It was a room full of major news outlets—microphones on, cameras rolling, bright lights, rapid-fire questions," she recalls. "Rather than relying on rigid scripting, I focused on staying grounded, present, and intentional." Here is her advice from that day.

- 1 Pause First. Listen Fully.** Actively listen to what is being asked—not what you think is being asked—and take a breath before answering. Pausing prevents speculation and over-sharing.
- 2 Be Human—But Stay Rooted in Truth.** Balance professionalism with relatability. Authenticity builds trust when grounded in facts.
- 3 Protect the Investigation Without Shutting Out the Public.** Transparency and investigative integrity are not mutually exclusive. Defer case-specific details when necessary while communicating with empathy and clarity.

Watch Commisso's Press Briefing



NEWS BRIEFS

Crime Stoppers tip and DNA lead to recovery in 1983 parental abduction

Forty-two years after her abduction from Kentucky, Michelle Newton has **reunited with her father**. Taken at age 3, Michelle recently discovered her true identity and contacted authorities. Simultaneously, a Crime Stoppers tip led investigators to Florida, where her mother, Debra, lived under an alias. DNA confirmed the identity of the former FBI “Top 8 Most Wanted” fugitive, who now faces **felony custodial interference charges**. “This is the kind of case you see once in a law-enforcement career,” said Colonel Steve Healey of Kentucky, noting how persistent investigative work and public tips can resolve even the coldest cases.



Multi-agency USMS operation brings home 43 endangered youth in Florida

The U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) led “Operation Northern Lights,” a landmark multi-agency initiative resulting in the **recovery of 43 critically missing children** across North Florida. The two-week operation, involving over 80 personnel from 25 agencies, targeted youth at risk of trafficking and exploitation. Recoveries spanned Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, with victims ranging from 18 months to 17 years old. The operation led to nine arrests and potential future trafficking charges. “This was the most successful missing child operation ever conducted in Northern Florida,” said Acting U.S. Marshal Greg Lejedal.



San Diego task force rescues 19 trafficking victims in ‘Home for the Holidays’ sting

A multi-agency task force in San Diego County **rescued 19 human trafficking victims**, including children as young as 12, during the annual “Home for the Holidays” operation. Conducted December 10–12, 2025, the three-day sting targeted motels in Chula Vista, National City, and San Diego. The operation resulted in four arrests on charges including pimping and pandering, plus six citations for attempted sex buying. District Attorney Summer Stephan emphasized the crackdown on an \$810 million local industry. Officials also highlighted upcoming legislation, Assembly Bill 379, which makes the purchase of sex from a minor a felony offense starting January 1, 2026.



Proposed law grants U.S. Marshals jurisdiction to find missing children in Indian Country

New bipartisan **legislation** aims to bolster the search for missing children in Indian Country. Introduced in October 2025 by Senators Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Markwayne Mullin (R-OK), the Tribal Warrant Fairness Act would authorize the U.S. Marshals Service to assist Tribal law enforcement in locating missing children and executing warrants. Currently, the Marshals Service lacks statutory authority to support Tribal agencies, creating jurisdictional gaps. Addressing over 4,000 unsolved cases and **2023 federal recommendations**, the bill seeks to close these gaps. “Tribal communities need more tools to combat violent crime,” said Senator Cortez Masto. The legislation grants Tribal agencies crucial access to federal investigative capabilities to accelerate recoveries and improve safety.



Montana bolsters prevention and funding for missing & murdered Indigenous persons

Native Americans comprise 24% of Montana’s missing persons reports despite representing only 6.5% of the population. To address this, the state enacted significant new legislation. **House Bill 83** authorizes the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Advisory Council to accept private funds, while **House Bill 545** adds a homicide investigator to the team. Prevention is also a priority: **Senate Bill 107** mandates human trafficking curriculum for schools, and **Senate Bill 245** requires training for bus drivers to identify trafficking indicators—critical steps given that over 80% of 2023’s missing reports involved minors. Additionally, the legislature passed a resolution urging Congress to fully fund Tribal law enforcement to close dangerous jurisdictional gaps.



Muckleshoot Tribe hosts national MMIP gathering to address ‘crisis level’ disparity

Indigenous people represent 3% of Washington state’s population yet account for over 7% of its missing persons cases, a disparity leaders call a “crisis level.” In response, the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe hosted the second **National Missing & Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) Coordinator Gathering** in November 2025. This event brought together 60 leaders from 13 states—including law enforcement, government officials, and advocates—to improve communication, response strategies, and family services. Washington continues to lead with such initiatives as the Missing Indigenous Person Alert (MIPA) system, which has issued 194 alerts since 2022, and the Cold Case Investigations Unit, which has helped locate more than 20 missing persons. Leaders emphasize that while these tools are saving lives, expanding services and building trust remains essential.



New 24/7 lifeline 'SafeCall' to support 72,000 missing youth throughout the United Kingdom

The *Independent's* **"SafeCall" campaign** has successfully raised £165,000 (about \$220,000 U.S.) to launch a critical new service for missing children across the UK. Created in partnership with the charity **Missing People**, SafeCall will provide a free, 24/7 lifeline to the estimated 72,000 young people who go missing annually. Supported by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and such ambassadors as Sir David Beckham, the service aims to reach vulnerable youth via a **dedicated helpline**, WhatsApp channel, and chatbot. "Thanks to you, Missing People can now build and launch SafeCall in 2026," said CEO Jo Youle, emphasizing that the service will offer confidential safety and support to children who feel scared or isolated.



New partnerships bolster International Cold Case Analysis Project

AMBER Alert Europe has strengthened its global reach by signing formal cooperation agreements with three leading universities: Goldsmiths/University of London (UK), Brandenburg University of Technology (Germany), and Southern University at New Orleans (USA). Already active in the **International Cold Case Analysis Project (ICCAP)**, these institutions bring specialized expertise in forensic psychology, digital forensics, and victimology to the organization's academic network of 54 universities. The expanded partnership aims to advance research and evidence-based policy regarding missing children and unresolved cases. By formalizing these ties, AMBER Alert Europe seeks to ensure that academic rigor remains at the core of its operational strategy, bridging the gap between theoretical research and practical application in child protection.



NAPTIP Rescues 58 Children trafficked under guise of education in Nigeria

The **National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP)** has confirmed the rescue of 58 children from a trafficking ring in Benue State, Nigeria. Officials report that approximately 300 children, aged 2 to 8, were taken from Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps by traffickers posing as educational benefactors in 2024. Following investigations that began in May 2025, NAPTIP executed four separate operations that resulted in the arrest of a suspected ringleader and four accomplices. While 58 children have been reunited with their families, efforts continue to locate the remaining missing victims. "We are doing everything in our power to bring them home," said a NAPTIP zonal commander, urging guardians to remain vigilant against similar schemes.



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opportunities for
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