Series of roundtables conducted in Alaska to address violent crimes, missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives, illegal narcotics and infrastructure challenges

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska – Officials from the White House and the U.S. Department of the Interior held a Reclaiming our Native Communities Roundtable in Nome, Alaska and a Public Safety Listening Session in Bethel, Alaska this week to discuss ways to address public safety challenges in the region. These listening sessions are a part of a series of meetings taking place with American Indian and Alaska Native community and tribal leaders across the country with the goal of implementing strategies that will end the violence and illicit activity disproportionately affecting these populations.

In Nome, the Reclaiming our Native Communities Roundtable focused on the social ills that challenge Native communities including the use of illegal narcotics, prevalence of domestic violence, and cold cases involving missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. According to the DOJ Bureau of Justice Statistics, American Indians and Alaska Natives are two and a half times more likely to experience violent crimes and at least two times more likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes in comparison to all other ethnicities.

“President Trump has been a tireless proponent of ending crime, ensuring justice is served, and promoting safe and economically strong rural communities, including Alaska Native communities,” **said Kate MacGregor, DOI Deputy Chief of Staff exercising the authority of Deputy Secretary**. “I appreciate Kawerak and the Association of Village Council Presidents for bringing so many strong voices together to listen, learn, and discuss solutions that will make a difference not only in rural Alaskan communities but throughout our country.”

“Alaska Native people face some of the highest levels of violence. These roundtables and listening sessions are critical to tailoring solutions to address this wave of violent crime and victimization in these communities,” **said Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney**. “I look forward to working hand in hand with local, state and national leaders on crafting solutions to create a healthier environment for our families and communities.”

“All men, women, and children in our region deserve to be safe in our communities. Unfortunately, in our region and in other rural Alaska communities, the statistics show that women and children in our rural communities are victimized at much higher rates than the rest of our state and nation,” **said Kawerak President Melanie Bahnke**. “Our communities deserve adequate public safety; today’s dialogue is a step in the right direction, and Kawerak, Inc. is especially grateful for Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney’s leadership in pursuing justice for Alaska Native and American Indian communities.”

Of the 56 federally recognized tribes that are a part of the Association of Village Council Presidents,

more than 40 participated in the public safety listening session in Bethel, Alaska. The tribal representatives who spoke highlighted the unique geographical and jurisdictional challenges that face their Native communities.

In June, Kate MacGregor, the Deputy Chief of Staff at DOI who is currently exercising the authority of the Deputy Secretary, and Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney held the first meeting in a series of roundtable discussions on the Gila River Indian Reservation to hear from Alaska Natives, Indian Country, tribal leadership and other advocates on ways to effectively end the escalating cycle of violence in these communities.

“Crime doesn’t know boundaries, which is why we are working to engage and develop law enforcement strategies to ensure the safety of our most vulnerable populations,” **said Charles Addington, Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs-Office of Justice Services**. “The Trump Administration is focused on hearing from local, state and national leaders to find a holistic approach to tackle the devastating challenges that have plagued our rural, and Native communities.”

“The Trump Administration is committed to making American communities safer, including Native communities across the nation,” **said Douglas Hoelscher, Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of White House Intergovernmental Affairs**. “These sessions allow us to listen and learn about the best use of resources, policies, and best practices to deliver measurable results that will improve communities across the nation while respecting local traditions and culture.”

“Since 2016 public safety has been the top priority for AVCP, but public safety has been lacking or missing in our villages for decades,” **said Chief Executive Officer for the Association of Village Council Presidents**. “This listening session brought to the forefront an opportunity to work together as tribes and tribal organizations with the federal government to find solutions to the public safety crisis our tribes are facing. Thank you Assistant Secretary Sweeney, Alaska Congressional Delegation, and the White House, for prioritizing public safety. I look forward to the changes I know will come by working together.”

“Tackling the issue of public safety, including the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women, has long-been among my top priorities in the Senate. However, to truly address this issue, it will take coordination at the federal, state, and local level. It must be an all-hands-on-deck effort,” **said U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)**. “These roundtable discussions led by the Department of Interior are an example of words being turned into action. I am committed to continuing my efforts, alongside the administration, to combat the unacceptably high rates of domestic violence and public safety challenges we’re seeing across our state. Together, we can and will ensure safer, more secure communities in Alaska.”

“I want to thank the Department of the Interior and the White House for focusing on these issues, especially on the heels of the Attorney General’s visit and announcements of law enforcement resources to our state and tribal entities,” **said U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan (R-AK)**. “As Alaskans, we know too well the affliction of violent crimes, substance abuse, and missing and murdered Alaska Natives. Just last week, Assistant Secretary Sweeney and I saw firsthand the challenges of public safety in rural Alaska; we traveled for four days in northwest and western Alaska to hear from people on the ground about their priorities – overcrowding and lack of housing, and public safety were the top two. I look forward to continuing to work with DOI, DOJ, and the White House to raise the standards of law enforcement and public safety in rural Alaska, so they too can have the basic protections that most

Americans take for granted."

"Alaskans know that our state's vast geography presents unique challenges, especially for law enforcement in our rural Native villages," **said Congressman Don Young (R-AK)**. "Horrifying stories of homicide, sexual assault, and other violent crimes have recently made headlines, and we must be doing all that we can to bring perpetrators to justice. I'm particularly concerned about the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and I'm glad that Assistant Secretary Sweeney has made this a priority for the Department. I will continue working with our Delegation and the Administration to ensure that our rural areas have the tools and resources they need to keep Alaskans safe."

Representatives from the White House and DOI, who met with these community leaders, included:

- Douglas Hoelscher, Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of White House Intergovernmental Affairs
- Jennie Lichter, the Deputy Director, WH Domestic Policy Council
- Gary Lawkowski, Senior Policy Advisor, Domestic Policy Council
- Kate MacGregor, Deputy Chief of Staff exercising the authority of Deputy Secretary for DOI
- Tara Sweeney, Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs;
- Mirtha Beadle, Director of the Office of Tribal Affairs and Policy; and
- Charles Addington, Director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services

Background

In June, DOI held its first roundtable on the Gila River Indian Community Reservation to develop a comprehensive approach to concentrate on cold cases, violent crimes, and missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. Deputy Chief of Staff Kate MacGregor and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney heard from Alaska Natives, Indian Country, tribal leadership, and advocates.

On June 28, Attorney General William Barr announced $10 million emergency funding to address the public safety crisis in rural Alaska, following a visit to the state. The $6 million in emergency funding from the Office of Justice Programs Bureau of Justice Assistance will go toward hiring, equipping, and training Village Public Safety Officers, Village Police Officers, and Tribal Police Officers working in rural Alaska, as well as for mobile detention facilities.

President Trump designated May 5 as Missing and Murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives Awareness Day to draw attention to the horrible acts of violence committed against American Indian and Alaska Native people, particularly women and children.

President Trump's proclamation states: "Ending the violence that disproportionately affects American Indian and Alaska Native communities is imperative. Under my Administration, Federal agencies are working more comprehensively and more collaboratively to address violent crime in Indian country, to recover the American Indian and Alaska Native women and children who have gone missing, and to find justice for those who have been murdered."

American Indian and Alaska Native people face alarming levels of violence. Data from the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that more than 1.5

million American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence, including sexual violence, in their lifetimes. American Indian and Alaska Native children attempt and commit suicide at rates far higher than those in any other demographic in our Nation, and often endure disproportionately high rates of endemic drug abuse, violence, and crime.

In 2018, DOI launched the first-ever Joint Law Enforcement Task Force on Opioids, focusing on Indian Country. Led by Bureau of Indian Affairs-Office of Justice Services, the task force partners with federal, state, tribal and local law enforcement to conduct multi-month undercover operations and stings to get drugs and dealers off the streets. In FY 2018, the Opioid Reduction Task Force seized more than 3,200 pounds of illegal narcotics with an estimated street value of $9.8 million. BIA-OJS also successfully led 15 Opioid Reduction Task Force operations in seven states that resulted in 372 arrests.

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