Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Third of seven locations follows openings in Bloomington, Minnesota and Rapid City, South Dakota

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Tara *Katuk* Sweeney announced today the opening of the third of seven offices established under the Operation Lady Justice Task Force to investigate cold cases involving missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Advisor to the President Ivanka Trump joined Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt for the launch of the first cold case office in Bloomington, Minn., on July 27 highlighting President Trump's commitment to forgotten men and women across our country and actions taken to end the violence against American Indians and Alaska Natives.

"President Donald Trump took action and is committed to addressing the missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native crisis impacting communities across the nation, and this cold case office in Billings, Montana will be critical to those efforts," said **Assistant Secretary Sweeney**. "As these offices are stood up, we will be better positioned to resolve these cold cases for the victims and their families."

"In Montana and across our nation, we're facing a devastating crisis of missing and murdered

indigenous people," said **United States Senator Steve Daines**. "That's why I'm glad to see the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services leading this charge and establishing this important new office."

"The Blackfeet Nation is in full support of the Cold Case Murder Task Force Office opening in our region and are hopeful that this will be a path forward for providing justice to the many Indian families who have lost loved ones to either murder and or abduction," said **Blackfeet Chairman Timothy Davis**.

"The **Chippewa Cree Tribe** is in support of the cold case murder Task Force! We need better communication at all levels in order to better address these issues in Indian country," said **Chairman Harlan Baker**. "With this task force I believe the mechanism will be in place to better serve these needs and address this specific issue for our native communities."

"For far too long have Crow Tribal members and other federally recognized Indian tribal members been victims of crimes that have gone unsolved, un-investigated and unresolved," said **Crow Tribe Chairman Alvin Not Afraid Jr.** "We look forward to the success of this office with aid from the BIA-OJS and the U.S. Department of Justice to assist the Crow Tribe Police Department among all other agencies in reopening cold cases to search for our missing and murdered persons."

"The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples' movement has been overlooked, underestimated and

ignored for decades and as the media began to open lines of communication for the families of 'missing persons' the response was overwhelming," said **Eastern Shoshone Business Council Vice Chairwoman Karen Snyder**. "We do know statistically, there are many unsolved cases on the Wind River Indian Reservation and historically, the tribe has not been able to provide resources to bring closure in those cases and to offer the families an opportunity to begin the healing process. The Eastern Shoshone Tribe supports the endeavors of the Cold Case Task Force."

"The new U.S. Department of Justice Cold Case Task Force Office that will be opened in Billings, Montana, will be a great assistance to help answer questions that have gone unanswered for years," said **Andrew Werk Jr., president of the Fort Belknap Indian Community**. "It will be a great help in bringing comfort and settlement to the families of those who have been missing for years. The Fort Belknap Indian Community is supportive of efforts to help Indian Country assist their members in finding closure and bringing individuals to justice."

"The Little Shell whole heartily supports the Cold Case Task Force," said **Little Shell Tribe Councilwoman Iris Kill Eagle**. "With the BIA taking a lead in the missing and murdered indigenous people, hopefully some closure can be given to families who have had loved ones missing or unsolved murders for years. It also helps to bring more attention to the problems faced in these cases. With this task force and the Attorney General's task force we are looking forward to some answers being found."

"On behalf of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, we really appreciate the opening of the Cold Case Murder Task Force Office here in the State of Montana. Over the years, missing and murdered indigenous women and other Native American victims have been minimized and were often times invisible to the justice system," said **Northern Cheyenne President Rynalea Pena**. "With the creation of this task force, we hope to see better communication and cooperation between law enforcement agencies and a resurgence of cold cases that have largely sat idle and maybe forgotten at times. More importantly, having a Cold Case Task Force brings to the forefront unsolved indigenous murder cases and creates awareness and, hopefully, a responsive and timely justice system within our law enforcement agencies."

"Indian Country – including our Wind River Reservation in Wyoming – has suffered terribly due to the unsolved disappearances and murders of our Native brothers and sisters," said **Northern Arapaho Business Council Chairman Lee Spoonhunter**. "We appreciate the BIA's commitment to pursue justice by establishing these offices charged with fighting the crisis of Missing and Murdered Native Americans."

"The newly created Cold Case Task Force fits well with the Montana Missing Indigenous Persons mission," said **Melissa Schlichting, deputy attorney general and legal services division administrator with the Montana Department of Justice**. "We look forward to working with the Cold Case Task Force and addressing missing Indigenous person cases in Montana."

In addition to the cold case office in Minnesota and a second that opened in Rapid City, S.D., on August 4, more are being established in Albuquerque, N.M.; Phoenix, Ariz.; Anchorage, Alaska; and Nashville, Tenn.

President Trump's Executive Order established the Operation Lady Justice Task Force, a multi-agency effort co-chaired by Secretary Bernhardt and U.S. Attorney General William P. Barr. Its purpose is to enhance the operation of the criminal justice system and address the staggering number of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Natives in tribal communities.

The cold case teams have been established in accordance with Executive Order 13898 which President Trump signed on November 26, 2019, to address this crisis. They will be staffed with law enforcement personnel and newly appointed special agents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services (BIA-OJS).

A way for top federal officials to engage, coordinate and work with tribal governments on developing strategies to address the crisis, the Operation Lady Justice Task Force is working to collect and manage data across jurisdictions; establish protocols for new and unsolved cases; establish multi-jurisdictional cold case teams; improve the response to investigative challenges; and provide clarity on the roles, authorities and jurisdiction for those involved. It is also charged with providing a report to the President of its work and accomplishments in meeting the executive order's mandate.

Since 2019, the Department of the Interior and the BIA have undertaken a number of efforts to address the crisis, conducting criminal investigations, stopping illicit drug activity and solving missing and murdered cases.

The BIA-OJS and its partners have opened 200 percent more drug cases across Indian Country than in the last year of the Obama Administration, and their tribal law enforcement officers have seized approximately 6,000 pounds of narcotics worth $30 million in the past two years. Preventing further violence against American Indians and Alaska Natives is largely predicated on ending illicit drug activities and sex trafficking.

The BIA-OJS's partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, known as NamUs, has led to the development and implementation of new tribal-affiliation data fields to assist law enforcement with capturing information to track missing and murdered persons in Indian Country. Since the addition of these new data fields last year, there has been a 60 percent increase in Native-person entries into the system.

The Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs advises the Secretary of the Interior on Indian Affairs policy issues, communicates policy to and oversees the programs of the BIA and the BIE, provides leadership in consultations with tribes, and serves as the DOI official for intra- and inter-departmental coordination and liaison within the Executive Branch on Indian matters.
