Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

New office joins those already opened in Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, New Mexico and Arizona since July 27

Media Contact: Interior_press@ios.doi.gov
For Immediate Release: August 26, 2020
Print PDF

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Tara *Katuk* Sweeney was in Anchorage, Alaska, to open the sixth office to investigate cold cases involving missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. She was also joined by Commissioner Jean Hovland with the Administration for Native Americans and Bureau of Indian Affairs-Office of Justice Services Director Charles Addington. This is an initiative of Operation Lady Justice, the task force established to address missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. The first cold case office was opened on July 27, 2020, in Bloomington, MN.

Advisor to the President Ivanka Trump joined U.S. Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt, Assistant Secretary Sweeney, and BIA-Office of Justice Services Director Charles Addington at the Bloomington, MN, event to highlight the Trump Administration's commitment to forgotten men, women and children across our country.

"The opening of the Operation Lady Justice cold case office here in Anchorage brings us full circle to the beginning, when the Trump Administration traveled to Nome and Bethel last August," said **Assistant Secretary Sweeney.** In 2019 Assistant Secretary Sweeney led a delegation of federal partners to Nome and Bethel to meet with tribal leaders and community advocates in a series of roundtables called *Reclaiming Our Native Communities.* The delegation of federal officials included White House Deputy Assistant to President Trump and Director for Intergovernmental Affairs Doug Hoelscher, Domestic Policy Council Deputy Director Jennie Lichter, Senior Policy Advisor to the Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans Mirtha Beadle, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services Director Charles Addington. "Those events served as the foundation for the recommendations Indian Affairs made to the Trump Administration," **Sweeney continued**. "The local voices guided our internal conversations, and as a result we've come a long way in a short time in addressing these issues through President Trump's executive order 13898. This executive order established the Operation Lady Justice Task Force. While humbling, this is a meaningful first step in providing closure to the families of victims."

"Under Operation Lady Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Justice have increased our information sharing, are collaborating on decision-making, and have grown in the understanding of how our work contributes to making our communities a safer place for our relatives and future generations. We must move upstream to improve prevention, intervene for those in crisis, and support individuals, survivors, families, and communities in need of healing," **said Administration for Native Americans Commissioner Jeannie Hovland**. "Tribal leaders, family members, community members, and all who have been advocating on behalf of our relatives who have gone missing or have been murdered, thank you for never giving up, for your persistence and perseverance. Your voices have been heard and we are here because of you and for

you. As Native people, we have withstood much adversity, overcome many challenges, and have remained resilient. I believe that together, we can and will end the crisis of missing and murdered Native Americans!"

"The AVCP Region's number one priority is public safety – this includes the issue of missing and murdered Alaska Natives and American Indians throughout the United States," said **Vivian Korthuis, Executive Vice President of the Association of Village Council Presidents** in Bethel, Alaska. "The solution to addressing these issues has three components: utilizing our traditional values and practices for prevention, basic law enforcement in our Native villages to protect our communities, and collaboration between tribal, federal, and state agencies to solve cases and bring justice to families and communities. Opening this office in Anchorage is an excellent example of the kind of collaboration we need to address this issue in Alaska. We look forward to the good work to be done in partnership with the Anchorage office in making a difference for all our families impacted."

"Kawerak, Inc., is very eager to see the opening of the Murdered and Missing Native American Cold Case Office in Alaska. For far too long, too many Alaska Natives, both male and female, have been murdered or have disappeared with no resolution for their families and communities, and no justice for the victims," said **Kawerak President Melanie Bahnke**. "These are our brothers and sisters, our cousins, our aunties and uncles, our mothers, our daughters, and our fellow community members, they are not simply "case files." They deserve the full attention of the proper authorities. We appreciate the resources being dedicated in the pursuit of justice for our people. *Igamsiqayugvikamsi* to all who are involved in this effort, may your work be bolstered knowing that you have the support of Alaska Natives across the state, including in the Bering Straits Region." Kawerak, Inc., is the non-profit arm of the Bering Straits Native Association, an organization of Alaska Native villages in the Bering Straits region.

"I am committed to the safety of every Alaskan. The opening of the American Indian and Alaska Native Cold Case Task Force Office in Anchorage is a critical step with additional resources, which I fully support," said **Governor Mike Dunleavy**. "I want to thank Indian Affairs Assistant Secretary Sweeney for her hard work in making this a reality. My administration will work diligently with this team to get justice for the missing and murdered Indigenous people of Alaska."

"Addressing the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous people has been a priority of mine for years, so the announcement by the administration in July was long-awaited and welcomed news. This has been a cooperative effort at all levels—from legislation to appropriations to an Executive Order where we have come together to bring about a significant initiative," **said U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski.** "The opening of the Operation Lady Justice Anchorage office is not only a sign that we have moved beyond awareness to action, but it is a real and tangible step toward turning the tide of this epidemic. I'm proud that this Cold Case Task Force office is possible because of the funding I worked to include in the 2020 omnibus appropriations bill. I applaud the administration for making this issue a priority and the many tribal advocates who urged action to make this a reality. I look forward to seeing the justice and healing this new initiative will bring to families across Alaska."

"Alaska leads the nation in many statistics that we are not proud of, including shockingly high rates of violent crime—rates that are even higher among our Alaska Native peoples," **said U.S. Senator Dan Sullivan**. "I appreciate the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Trump administration for focusing on this societal scourge by standing up the 'Operation Lady Justice' initiative, addressing the blight of missing and murdered Native Americans. We've been able to learn a great deal from the people most affected by this crisis thanks to engagements, like the 'Reclaiming Our Native Communities' roundtables hosted

by Assistant Secretary Sweeney, in rural Alaska and throughout Indian Country. Alaskans welcome the presence of the BIA OJS Cold Case Office to offer closure to the families who have been hurting for too long, and to provide the justice that we all expect from our justice system."

"Alaska Native communities are home to some of the most remote population centers in our state. Because of the difficulty in travel and communication, the scourge of missing and murdered Alaska Natives, particularly women and girls, has tragically impacted far too many families," said **U.S. Representative Don Young**. "Today's opening of the first Missing and Murdered Native Americans Cold Case office in Anchorage is important news for the victims and families who deserve nothing short of justice. I am grateful to the Trump Administration, Secretary Bernhardt, and Assistant Secretary Sweeney for their commitment to Alaska Natives and Indigenous people across our country. Our work must not stop. It is my great hope that we can turn the tide in the fight against crimes perpetrated in our Native communities, and it will continue to be one of my highest priorities to ensure that Alaska is a safe place for all."

In addition to Bloomington, MN, cold case offices were opened in Rapid City, SD, on August 4; Billings, MT, on August 6; Albuquerque, NM, on August 11; and Phoenix, AZ, on August 13, 2020. Another office is planned for Nashville, TN, in the near future.

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 Indians 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 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, alcohol abuse 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 persons in Indian Country. Since the addition of these new data fields last year and NamUs' extensive outreach to

states with large tribal populations with the result that they are inputting data directly into the system, there has been a 60 percent increase in Native-person entries in NamUs.

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.

Established in 1974 through the Native American Programs Act (NAPA), the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) serves all Native Americans, including state and federally recognized tribes, American Indian and Alaska Native organizations, Native Hawaiian organizations and Native populations throughout the Pacific Basin (including American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands). ANA promotes self-sufficiency for Native Americans by providing discretionary grant funding for community based projects, and training and technical assistance to eligible tribes and native organizations.