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Yurok Tribe issues emergency declaration to raise awareness about MMIW

Series of human trafficking attempts occur on reservation, surrounding area

Today, the Yurok Tribal Council issued an emergency declaration in response to a spate of missing persons and attempted human trafficking incidents on the reservation and in Arcata, where there is a disproportionate number of cases involving missing and murdered indigenous women (MMIW).

“Today, we are asking our local, state and federal partners to take a stronger stand against the trafficking of Native women and girls,” said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “While human trafficking and abductions have been all too common in the Humboldt County area, I ask all of our members to be extra cautious at this time. If you have to go into town, please take someone with you and let a family member know when you expect to return.”

In the last month, the Yurok Tribal Court received reports from seven Yurok women, including mothers with young children, who were approached by would-be traffickers. Thankfully, all were able to make it to safety. In mid-October, Emmilee Risling was declared missing. The Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribe, in conjunction with the Humboldt County Sheriff’s Office, implemented a coordinated, month-long effort to locate her, but she has not been found. The Hupa woman was last seen near Weitchpec on the Yurok Reservation. The Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribes are offering a \$20,000 reward for information leading to Emmilee’s safe return.

The Tribal Council issued the emergency declaration through a resolution, which speaks to the underlying cause of the MMIW crisis. According to the resolution: “The intergenerational impacts of 170 years of violence, trafficking and murder through missions, massacres, forced relocation, state sanctioned indentured servitude, boarding schools, widespread removal of children from their families through the child welfare system, disproportionate incarceration, police violence, and high rates of gender violence are still playing out to this day, and directly contribute to the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.”

Per capita, native women and girls are victims of human trafficking at a much higher rate. Tribes across the US are advocating for additional resources to confront this indelible issue. In 2020, 5,295 indigenous people were reported missing to the National Crime Information Center. At the end of the same year, 1,496 were still missing. Last year, there were 18 cases involving missing and

murdered indigenous women and girls in California, according to a [report](#) produced by the Yurok Tribal Court and the Sovereign Bodies Institute (SBI). The actual number is likely much higher because MMIWG cases are poorly documented at the state and federal levels. A third of all cases in California occurred in Mendocino, Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, despite the sparse populations in these areas. Even worse, murders of Native women in the state are seven times less likely to be solved.

“Every one of our families has been impacted by this issue. It cannot be allowed to continue,” said Chairman James.

During the past two years, the Yurok Tribe has substantially increased its capacity to respond to MMIW cases both on and off of the reservation. In 2019, the Yurok Tribal Court, in partnership with SBI, started the ‘To’ Kee Skuy’ Soo Ney-wo-chek’ (I Will See You Again in a Good Way) Program to combat the crisis. The Program aims to improve the efficacy of MMIW investigations and establish an enhanced level of protection for Native women, girls and two-spirit individuals in California, one of the top five states for MMIW cases. The program is also developing the first MMIW database in the state. Additionally, the Court formed the Office of the Tribal Prosecutor, which aids in the investigation and prosecution of MMIW and domestic violence cases in all jurisdictions.

Similar to the Yurok Tribe, most tribes are located in rural areas, where law enforcement is minimal due to enduring inequities in federal funding. Predators intentionally target rural and tribal lands because there is less chance of getting caught. MMIW cases, including local incidents, often involve multiple law enforcement jurisdictions, making investigation infinitely more challenging. Prior to the formation of the Tribal Court’s MMIWG2 Program, the Tribe had no formal way to influence off-reservation cases. In many states, including California, Tribes are further hindered by Public Law 280. Public Law 280 grants the state jurisdiction over most violent crimes. When federal legislators determine where to distribute tribal law enforcement dollars, tribes in PL 280 states are often left out. There is no doubt that PL 280 has contributed to the inordinately high number of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in Humboldt County.

“The quantity of MMIW cases in the local area and across the country is staggering. This needs to change and it needs to change now,” concluded Chairman James.

Here are helpful tips to avoid being a victim of human traffickers

1. When in public, be cognizant of your surroundings.
2. Travel in groups
3. Trust your instincts
4. Be suspicious of strangers who reach out via social media
5. Take swift action – if someone makes you feel unsafe, leave immediately and report it to law enforcement
6. Learn self defense