

When a Loved One Goes Missing

*A Quick Reference Guide
for Families of Missing
Indigenous Women: What to
Do in the First 72 Hours*



**NATIONAL
INDIGENOUS**
WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER

Introduction

This guide is a part of our *MMIW Toolkit for Understanding and Responding to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women for Families and Communities*.

The toolkit includes a downloadable PDF of this guide, a customizable missing person flyer, an MMIW awareness poster for Tribal programs, and an online database of local emergency contacts, hotlines and other resources, which can be accessed online at **niwrc.org/mmiwtoolkit**.

This resource has been updated as of January 2024.

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S
RESOURCE CENTER (NIWRC)
P.O. Box 99, Lame Deer, MT 59043
1-406-477-3896 | niwrc.org

A Quick Reference Guide for Families of Missing Indigenous Women: What to Do in the First 72 Hours

The information provided in this guide does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal advice. Readers of this toolkit should contact an attorney to obtain legal advice.

This guide is not meant to encourage families to take on law enforcement responsibilities, including collecting and preserving evidence. Families can keep records and documentation to share with law enforcement, such as a timeline, a record of a person's first-hand experience, court documents, or prior police reports. Chain of custody issues may arise from interference with a potential crime scene.

Due to the historic and often inadequate response from law enforcement, this

guide was designed to assist families and advocacy organizations in responding when a Native woman goes missing. It provides information about immediate steps that can be taken in the first 72 hours after a person goes missing, especially where the law enforcement response is non-existent or non-responsive.

While this guide aims to provide steps toward an ideal response, the outcome may or will depend on the resources and training of local law enforcement and service providers. Many families have expressed anger, frustration, and disappointment in the lack of resources, knowledge, handling, and inconsistent communication and coordination of case details and investigations.

These steps may or may not be relevant in every community.

NOTE: Please view *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide*, which

can be accessed online at bit.ly/3kAclST to address how to respond when someone 17 or younger goes missing, which involves a unique set of laws, policies, and other resources.

Time is of the essence when someone you love goes missing. Do not delay – take these important steps to make every second count:

- (1) Contact local law enforcement.**
- (2) Gather information and keep records/documents for use, as needed.**
- (3) Ask a family/friend/advocate for support for yourself.**
- (4) Enlist the help of your family, community, victim services, Tribal Coalitions (<https://www.atcev.org/tribal-coalitions/>), or grassroots organizers.**

Step (1): CONTACT LAW ENFORCEMENT - *DO NOT WAIT*

Contact local law enforcement and search and rescue teams, including volunteer teams, immediately. Consider designating a spokesperson for the family as an option to serve as the central point of contact with law enforcement. Make a log of all contacts and communications with law enforcement and other responders, noting the date and time, their responses/actions, and name and badge number.

If 911 emergency services are not available in your location, call whatever law enforcement agency you would contact for any other type of life-threatening emergency. In addition, contact law enforcement agencies in areas where you believe your loved one may have gone missing. When you contact police, tell them that you need to file a missing person report. **There is no required amount**

of time you must wait in order to file a report. It is important to share with the police as much detail as possible to help identify your loved one, including:

- Full name, any nicknames or aliases.
- Date of birth.
- Descriptive physical features (ex. height, weight, hair colors, eye color).
- Any identifying marks, such as tattoos, birthmarks, or scars.
- What the individual was wearing when they disappeared.
- Whether the missing person has a medical condition that requires regular treatment or medication (ex. if she is pregnant, diabetic, etc.).
- If you suspect your loved one was stalked or lured away via Internet (ex., Facebook, Twitter), share with local law enforcement so that they can consider asking the FBI for assistance with a possible trafficking or internet-related crime.

Do not wait to gather more information before taking this critical first step. You can fill in any missing details later. When you and your designated spokesperson speak with law enforcement, ask for the officer's name, badge number, telephone number, and police report number, and note this information for regular and consistent follow-up conversations. The law enforcement officer(s) should provide updates regularly. Whenever possible, have a witness with you when talking with law enforcement.

A missing person could be transported across Tribal, county, state lines or even international borders via plane, train, car, bus, or boat. Consider contacting and sharing your missing person flyer with the following agencies to be on the lookout for your loved one:

- Local department of transportation,
- Train and bus stations,
- Port authorities,

- Airports, and
- Border control (Note: Be aware of when border and immigration authorities might pose unintended harmful risks, like in the instance of an undocumented Indigenous person).

The Missing Indigenous Sisters Tools Initiative (MISTI) created a free, 45-page search workbook for families of missing Indigenous women. Use the workbook, or even a simple notebook, to keep all of the important information about the missing person in one place for easy reference. Download the workbook at bit.ly/MISTIworkbook.

Step (2): GATHER AND TRACK INFORMATION TO SHARE WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

After you've notified the police, consider any information or details you may have missed and write them in your notebook. Keep records and documentation to share with law enforcement. You can reconnect with law enforcement when you have additional information, such as:

- Where was the missing person last seen?
- Were they with someone at the time? If it was a stranger, describe the stranger as best you can.
- If the missing person was alone at the time, who did they last see or speak with? Note the individual's name, phone number, address, and any other important information.

- What is the missing person's Tribal affiliation/enrollment?
- Is their vehicle also missing? If so, provide a description of the vehicle, including make, model, color, year, and license plate number, if known.
- Did they leave behind anything important, like their phone, keys, wallet, or ID?
- Do they suffer from any illness or condition that might make them a danger to themselves or others? (Note: Be mindful, however, that law enforcement may respond to mental health issues or disability with excessive or unnecessary force and consider the unique circumstance of the missing individual.)
- Have they been abused or received any threats of harm? Are they afraid of anyone? Did they witness a crime or are they involved in a new or ongoing dispute?

- Have they been acting outside of their normal pattern of behavior, such as missing work or not picking up their children from school?
- Jot down notes of everything you can remember immediately before your loved one went missing.
- Make a list of the places they frequent, such as work, school, grocery stores, restaurants/bars, parks, and any other regular stops.
- Make a list of the friends and family members they regularly see or communicate with, including anyone out of state and their contact information.
- Do not go into a place where it may be harmful to you or others (examples include following a suspect, questioning people you may suspect, making accusations or speculations, and making statements or comments that could be perceived as threatening).

DO:

- Have support with you as you identify clothing and personal belongings.
- Limit access to the area where they were last seen. For example, if possible, carefully cordoning off the area until law enforcement arrives.
- Document any surveillance videos or footage of areas, including time/date stamps that your loved one frequents, and share with law enforcement to investigate.
- Keep records of information provided to law enforcement, including date/time, name/badge number, and location.
- Gather any banking or credit card information if possible.
- Turn over the computer(s) used by the missing person to law enforcement if requested.

While waiting for law enforcement to arrive, DO NOT:

- Touch or move anything before law enforcement arrives.
- Tidy or clean up their home, vehicle, or the area where they were last seen – dusting, cleaning, or throwing things away may remove fingerprints or discard important evidence.
- Delete or alter any call history, text messages, social media accounts, cell phone images, or web browser history. Law enforcement may request bank records, social media account information and cell phone records.

Step (3): ASK A FAMILY/FRIEND/ ADVOCATE FOR SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF AND FAMILY MEMBERS

Families of a missing or murdered woman commonly feel a range of emotions and mental states, including anger, shock, grief, depression, being in a fog, and denial. It is critical to have support, protection, and assistance, including from traditional practitioners when interacting with law enforcement, media, and other agencies.

Advocates, attorneys, elders, or trusted counselors can help facilitate family discussions to get everyone on the same page and ensure your family shares the same understanding about Tribal/family/cultural protocols and next steps.

Step (4): ENLIST HELP

Contact friends, family, and co-workers to see if they know the missing person's whereabouts, and log those conversations in your notebook. You can also ask for help with specific tasks such as:

- Calling trusted elders and spiritual support, churches, hospitals, jails, and homeless shelters.
- Designing an easy-to-read, attention-grabbing flyer.
 - Include the words “MISSING: MAY BE IN DANGER” in big, bold text.
 - Include a recent, clear photo of your missing loved one.
 - Add a physical description.
 - Include any known circumstances of her disappearance, such as date or location.

- Include contact information, including law enforcement contact information. **DO NOT USE YOUR OWN PERSONAL PHONE NUMBER.**
- Posting copies of the flyer in high-traffic areas.
- Managing social media (note: consider having one person make the flyer and ensure the accuracy of information).
 - Consider creating a public Facebook page to share information widely or utilizing multiple platforms (ex. Instagram, X or formerly ‘Twitter,’ etc.).
 - Using hashtags to raise visibility.
- Organizing a search.
 - Coordinate with law enforcement to avoid duplicating efforts or revealing information to the public that could jeopardize the investigation or search efforts.

- Identify local search resources available (ex. volunteers, dog searches, boats, etc.).
- Solicit and register the names and contact information of all volunteers.
- Communicate with volunteers in advance about suggested items to wear/bring in order to stay safe and healthy given the weather, terrain, and the time of day.
- Separate the search area into “grids” and assign teams (not individuals) to each grid.
- Brief the group in advance with helpful tips about notifying law enforcement as soon as they’ve found the missing person or any information that could help find the missing person, spacing and speed of volunteers, and other expectations for a successful search.

- Build a coalition of advocacy groups, both local and national by working with programs addressing domestic violence and sexual assault ([/www.atcev.org/tribal-coalitions/](http://www.atcev.org/tribal-coalitions/)).
- Contacting the local news.
Note: There are benefits and drawbacks to using social and news media, so be sure to weigh the increased visibility with the potential intrusion on your family's privacy. Consider designating a spokesperson for the family as an option.

This quick reference guide is designed as a starting point for families, communities, and advocacy organizations to respond when a Native woman goes missing.

Our expanded MMIW Toolkit for Understanding and Responding to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women for Families and Communities can be accessed online at:

niwrc.org/mmiwtoolkit

