

FULL STATEMENT OF MYRON LIZER
Former Vice President of the Navajo Nation
Before the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance

Hearing: “Missing and Murdered Indigenous People: Strengthening Public Safety in Tribal Communities”
September 15, 2026

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Myron Lizer. I previously served as Vice President of the Navajo Nation. I appear today in my personal capacity as a former elected leader of the Navajo people. I do not speak for the present Navajo Nation government. I speak from the experience of having served our people and from having seen, firsthand, the consequences when public-safety systems do not work as they should.

The problem of missing and murdered Indigenous people is not new. Congress knows that. Tribal leaders know that. Families know it better than anyone. Ask the family of Ella Mae Begay.

On June 15, 2021, Ella Mae Begay, age 62, a grandmother of nine, a weaver, and respected elder, was reported missing from her residence near Sweetwater, Arizona, by family members. Early that morning, her vehicle, a Ford F-150, was seen leaving the residence. It was believed that the truck may have been driven toward Thoreau, New Mexico, and may have proceeded in the direction of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Preston Tolth was quickly identified by family members and law enforcement as a suspect. When apprehended, Tolth ultimately confessed to FBI agents to stealing her truck (carjacking), beating Ella Mae Begay, and leaving her on the side of the road for dead. However, Tolth never did say where Ella Mae Begay’s body was located and was never charged with her murder. Instead, he was offered a plea deal, and on June 15, 2026, five years to the day, Ella Mae Begay went missing, Preston Tolth walked out of prison and continued his life of crime.

Where is the trust? Where is the accountability? Where is the justice for the family of Ella Mae Begay?

The Navajo have a committed community of people engaged in this issue and who advocate for missing and murdered Dine’ relatives and the vulnerabilities, gaps, and challenges surrounding this issue. Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty of the Navajo Nation has been leading this charge. Her efforts and passion deserve recognition. However, even her extraordinary efforts are handicapped by resource issues, a lack of protocols around the reporting of these cases, insufficient data, a lack of resources for the victims and their families, and often a lack of collaboration with border towns off the reservation and federal partners.

Let me state, this is NOT an FBI problem. This is a Navajo problem. For too long the default has been to rely on the FBI. However, beyond creating posters and offering rewards, the FBI is limited in what it can do to solve this issue and by its own admission does not work cases involving missing adults unless foul play is suspected. However, until there is an investigation, the possibility of foul play can remain unknown. Even so, FBI is conflicted with too many other responsibilities to effectively address the volume of these cases with the attention, commitment, and resources needed, as in the Ella Mae Begay case, and so many others.

No group cares more about our Navajo people, than the Navajo people. No group cares more about our missing and murdered relatives, young or old, than the Navajo.

In fact, if I asked those of you on this committee today, how many of you have had a loved one disappear, my guess is likely none of you would raise your hands or be able to name a single relative. If the same question is asked to the Navajo, every tribal member old enough to know can name a relative who has disappeared. Every Navajo family has lived through the pain, anguish, and uncertainty of a missing relative.

The question before us now, however, should be different.

After years of task forces, appropriations, executive actions, federal initiatives, and promises of help and better coordination, why do Indigenous people still disappear or die without cases being promptly resolved?

From my perspective, one answer is clear: we have built many programs, perhaps too many, and given too much responsibility to outside agencies to investigate these crimes, but we have not yet built one continuously accountable system.

A serious case on the Navajo Nation may pass through Navajo Police Department, state and local law enforcement in surrounding border towns, the FBI, a United States Attorney's Office, tribal prosecutors, victim advocates, and through multiple, disparate information systems. Each may have authority and good people doing difficult work. But every time responsibility changes hands, there is an opportunity for evidence, information, time, or accountability to be lost. Time is not on our side in these cases. Each level of bureaucracy, each progression from one law enforcement agency to another, each duplication of effort, is time lost. When time is lost, our relatives are lost.

That is where Congress should focus.

The Navajo Nation's experience demonstrates that tribal-federal coordination can work. There have been successful investigations and prosecutions. But successful coordination should not depend upon personal relationships. Nor should coordination rely solely on checklists and antiquated protocols. Coordination should not exist in theory or name only.

It should be built into the system.

When the federal government declines prosecution, or even investigation, the tribal government should receive timely notice and any associated evidence while tribal prosecution remains possible. A federal declination should not automatically become the end of a case where a tribal sovereign still has lawful authority to act. The Navajo Nation has spent years building its Major Crimes capacity specifically to investigate serious matters, including federally declined cases.

The same principle applies before a case ever reaches a prosecutor. A thorough investigation should be conducted. Evidence must be properly collected, preserved, documented, and transferred. Reports must be completed. Missing-person information must be entered into appropriate databases and kept current. And someone must remain responsible for the case from the first report through final disposition.

Congress should not measure success by how many task forces are created or how much money is appropriated.

Those are inputs.

The questions that matter to families are much simpler: Was my relative found? Was the case investigated? Is it being prosecuted? If prosecution is declined, why?

There must be accountability within tribal systems. Many tribal law-enforcement programs operate with substantial federal funding or perform federal law-enforcement functions under contracts or compacts. Tribal self-determination is essential, but self-determination and accountability are not opposites. Where federal funds are provided to deliver law-enforcement services, there should be accountability to determine whether those services are being provided, whether investigations are timely, whether evidence is properly controlled, and whether deficiencies are corrected.

Likewise, when federal systems fail, when federal law enforcement acts with indifference, fails to properly investigate, or fails to act with the fidelity and integrity they purport, they too should be held accountable.

I suggest Congress concentrate on five areas.

First, require a formal federal-to-tribal handoff process when serious cases are declined or materially delayed. If tribal law enforcement could work more collaboratively with its federal partners, this issue would likely solve itself as gaps in knowledge pertaining to the case and evidence would not exist and tribal law enforcement would concurrently be building a case for prosecution in tribal court.

Second, establish measurable standards for evidence transfer, case tracking, database entry, interagency communication, and for collaboration on investigations that extend off the reservation. Criminals do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. Rather, they exploit them to their benefit. This is especially true in Indian country where checkerboard jurisdictions are common and law enforcement authorities can change depending on which side of the street you are on.

Third, invest directly in tribal investigators, prosecutors, victim advocates, forensics, evidence management, technology, and education. Doing so could mitigate dependency on the FBI by allowing tribal investigators to thoroughly and rigorously investigate crimes and present appropriate cases directly to the U.S. Attorney for prosecution. The following are seven examples of what this investment could look like.

- a. DNA Technology - Provide resources for Rapid DNA technology. The FBI backlogs are too extensive. Providing Rapid DNA technology to the Navajo would support victim identification, the identification of missing remains, bringing closure to families, and a crucial tool in solving crimes, not just for the Navajo Nation, but for our law enforcement partners throughout the Four Corners region, northern Arizona, and western New Mexico.
- b. A Tribal DNA Database - Create a tribal DNA database that is a stand-alone or “air-gapped”, creating guardrails around the data and keeping other labs from having access to the tribal profiles. The tribe or tribes would be the custodians of the DNA profiles. This would build a stronger trust between the community and law enforcement while safeguarding the identities of all the profiles entered in the tribal database. An MOU with the FBI to use their CODIS software would allow the data, if needed, to be entered manually to be compared to NDIS (National DNA Index System). This database would be key in helping to solve crimes and identify missing persons and or missing remains.
- c. A Tribal Fusion Center - Establish a first of its kind Tribal Fusion Center. DHS currently supports intelligence fusion centers in all 50 states but none on tribal land. A dedicated tribal fusion center, staffed by tribal law enforcement and intelligence analysts would not only be a resource for our tribal communities throughout the nation but would be a force multiplier for other law enforcement agencies. This fusion center could also house the tribal DNA database.
- d. DHS Law Enforcement Assistance – Provide the resources necessary for Homeland Security Investigations and the United States Secret Service to assist tribal law enforcement, when needed, with their forensic, technical, training, and investigative capabilities. Continue to expand the scope of HSI’s Shadow Wolves program giving more tribes opportunities to participate across the country to help combat transnational crime taking place within their sovereign nations. Expand opportunities for the Homeland Security Task Forces to work, as appropriate and as needed, with tribal law enforcement to target the crimes creating vulnerabilities on tribal lands that often lead to missing and murdered indigenous people.
- e. Special Assistant U.S. Attorneys – Provide funds to help pay for appropriately trained tribal prosecutors to serve as Special Assistant U.S. Attorneys (SAUSA’s) within the offices in which they work. Bringing SAUSA’s into the tribal prosecutor’s office would allow for more federal prosecutions of serious cases by tribal authorities, expedite the handling of those cases, the preparation and execution of legal process, and save valuable time in cases where time is critical. It would also allow for concurrent prosecutorial strategies to be developed, giving even more options to hold offenders accountable.

- f. Victim Advocates and Forensic Interviewers – Enhance support for the tribal victim assistance personnel who provide resources and assistance to crime victims and their families. Funding for those resources and enhanced training is critical. Likewise, expanding the number of forensic interview specialists within tribal law enforcement is essential to building successful cases with victims and witnesses who are traumatized, marginalized, vulnerable, and or exploited.
- g. Education and **Prevention** – Much more work needs to be done to educate tribal communities, young and old alike, about MMIP; the vulnerabilities that often lead to cases involving MMIP, so it can be prevented; and what to do immediately when a loved one goes missing, increasing the likelihood they will be found quickly.

Fourth, provide tribal governments with greater access to Special Tribal Criminal Jurisdiction (STCJ), a resource under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and even expand the types of crimes covered by STCJ to further protect women, children and other tribal members. STCJ gives tribal authorities the ability to prosecute non-Indian offenders who prey on Native Americans for certain crimes. Costs associated for implementing this jurisdiction have proven to be prohibitive and currently only about 5%, or less, of federally recognized tribes participate.

Likewise, make BIA Special Law Enforcement Commissions more accessible to those tribal and non-tribal law enforcement agencies requesting these authorities. BIA Special Law Enforcement Commissions are a vital tool for tribal law enforcement, allowing them to act in the capacity of federal officers in the performance of their duties and pursue criminal violations off the reservation where and when appropriate. In the same way, for non-tribal agencies, the BIA commissions give local and state law enforcement the authority to assist tribal law enforcement on tribal lands and with federal cases. Again, criminals do not respect jurisdictional lines. Missing people are often taken or move off the reservation. Why are we handicapping our law enforcement?

And fifth, require meaningful accountability—federal and tribal—for whether the public-safety responsibilities being funded are being performed and performed as intended or promised.

Broken systems and failed promises have created decades of resource gaps, distrust of programs, and investigative failures, finally resulting in a general acceptance of the MMIP phenomenon on the Navajo Nation. We can do better. We must do better. No longer should being Navajo mean that going missing, being murdered, or falling victim to exploitative crime, is just simply the risk of being Navajo and living on our land.

Families should not have to understand federal Indian law before they can understand what happened to their loved one's case. They should not have to determine whether the FBI, tribal police, a prosecutor, or another agency is still responsible.

Government should know.

The Navajo Nation does not need more posters or another promise that the system will coordinate. Our people need a system in which coordination, true collaboration, lawful handoff, and accountability are operating requirements. And, we need a system that truly cares about this issue, and the Navajo people.

That is the standard by which those who accept responsibility for public safety should be judged.

Ahéhee' shí k'éeí dóó shí diné'ée.

Thank you, my relatives and my people.

