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Opening Statement of Chairman Jamie Raskin Hearing on “The Neglected Epidemic of Missing BIPOC Women and Girls” March 3, 2022

Good morning. Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today and thanks to all the Members who are participating in this important hearing. I want to thank my friends, Representatives Kelly, Pressley, and Ocasio-Cortez for the critical work they are doing in combatting intimate partner violence and advocating for missing women and children throughout the country.

I hope this hearing will help shine a light on the shocking and mostly unknown plague of missing and murdered women and girls in communities of color. In 2020, 100,000 of the 250,000 women and girls who went missing in the United States were Black, Brown, or Indigenous. Black women and girls make up just 13 percent of the female population in the U.S. but accounted for 35 percent of missing women in 2020.

The crisis is especially dire among Indigenous communities. For example, in South Dakota, 2-of-3 missing persons are Native American despite only 1-of-10 South Dakotans being Native American. In Montana, Native Americans account for 1 of every 4 missing persons despite only 1 of every 20 Montanans being Native American.

However, these numbers do not reflect the full extent of this epidemic. According to the Government Accountability Office, the total number of missing and murdered Indigenous women is unknown. Federal databases do not contain comprehensive national data. In addition, the national data that is collected includes Hispanic and Latina women among white women, leaving their numbers wholly unknown. Missing women from immigrant communities also often go unreported and uncounted for many reasons, including concern over interacting with law enforcement.

The causes driving the disproportionate rates of missing women of color are many and complex. Intimate partner violence affects nearly half of all Black and Indigenous women. Unfortunately, fewer than 20 percent of all women who face intimate partner violence seek services, which only perpetuates the cycle of violence that far too often ends in tragedy.

Sex trafficking also drives these disproportionate numbers. Nearly two-thirds of sex trafficking victims in this country are Black and Latina or Hispanic. The numbers are just as dire for native women: in South Dakota, Native American women and girls constitute 40 percent of sex trafficking victims.

Native women also face unique dangers. So-called “man camps”—temporary housing for pipeline and oil industry laborers—affect Indigenous and other marginalized communities in rural areas where they are located. Studies have shown that the placement of “man camps” statistically coincide with significant increases in crime. For example, the Fort Berthold reservation saw a 75 percent increase in sexual assaults on Native women after “man camps” arose in their region during the oil construction boom of the late 2000’s. Notably, there was no corresponding rise in crime outside the region.

Unfortunately, these communities are structurally hamstrung in their responses to such threats. Tribal law enforcement is prohibited from prosecuting non-Native individuals who commit crimes against their people. Local law enforcement often has limited resources, spread thin, and may be hesitant to engage with jurisdictional uncertainty.

Federal law enforcement has not been able to step into these gaps. They may have a geographically limited presence to investigate and prosecute serious crimes against Native communities. Even so, in 2017, U.S. attorneys declined to prosecute over one in three of their cases arising in Indian Country, primarily citing to a lack of evidence.

Jurisdictional wrangling and limited resources often lead to significant delays. The first 24 to 48 hours in a missing persons case is critical. Poor communication between law enforcement agencies can be the difference between life or death in a missing persons case.

The baffling neglect shown by the media towards cases involving missing and murdered women of color is a primary reason this epidemic remains obscure to the public. Countless families in these communities shoulder the burden of a missing loved one alone. Countless others shoulder the additional trauma of a law enforcement system that discounts their fears and pain.

Just one example—in Wyoming, out of the more than 700 Indigenous women who have gone missing in the last 10 years, less than one in five received any media coverage at all. How is that possible?

We are here today to render visible this invisible crisis in our midst. Congress and the Biden Administration have taken preliminary steps to clarify the epidemic of missing and murdered women and color. Savana’s Act, the Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act, and the Ashanti Alert Act were enacted into law. The administration has implemented executive orders directing Department-by-Department initiatives that could go far towards addressing the systemic underservice and cycles of poverty driving the plague of missing and murdered women in communities of color.

But we have more work to do.

We must act to ensure that federal law enforcement is fully coordinating with the Western states that have created Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women task forces. The Administration needs to constitute the Joint Commission on Reducing Violence Against Indians. Congress must reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act and the Fredrick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Act and fully fund implementation of the Ashanti Alert Act. Finally, we must consider the Protect Black Women and Girls Act, introduced by my friend and colleague, Congresswoman Kelly.

I hope that we can work together to confront and address this pressing problem. And I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses today.

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