

Improving Indigenous Women's Safety through a Red Dress Alert System

SUBMISSION PREPARED BY THE ONTARIO NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (ONWA) FOR CONSIDERATION BY STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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Ontario Native Women's Association



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Introduction

The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the creation of a national public alert system – a Red Dress Alert - for missing Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit individuals.

The implementation of this system is a critical step to responding to the ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and 2S (MMIWG2S) crisis. ONWA advocates for the **immediate implementation** of Red Dress Alert system **alongside regional/local coordinated safety strategies** that focus on improving the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals.

ONWA honours the bravery, wisdom and leadership of all survivors and family members for their tireless efforts to raise awareness of MMIWG2S, and calls for immediate action on all Calls for Justice. MMIWG2S has been a national crisis for decades. The ongoing disappearances and murders of Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals continue every day, and inaction on strategies to keep Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals safe allows for this violence to continue.

ONWA strongly recommends that the Red Dress Alert remain focused on Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals. While we acknowledge that Indigenous men and boys also go missing and are murdered, research supports that the dynamics and risks of violence and abuse are different for men and women. Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals experience shockingly high rates of sexual violence, human trafficking/sexual exploitation, and intimate partner violence.¹ We know that the violence perpetrated against Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals is fueled by discrimination against the individual's race and sex/gender. A Red Dress Alert for Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals is a specific action among the National Inquiry into MMIWG2S's 231 Calls for Justice. Including men and boys would take the focus away from the issue of gender-based violence. Responses to the National Inquiry into MMIWG2S's 231 Calls for Justice must focus on and prioritize the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals.

ONWA advocates for inter-agency coordination to quickly respond when an Indigenous woman, girl, or 2S individual is reported missing. This work includes law enforcement working with Indigenous organizations at every step of the way. Indigenous women, girls, 2S individuals and their families continue to tell us they do not feel safe when interacting with police or within justice systems. Indigenous peoples continue to be over and under policed due to the history of colonization, residential schools, and inter-generational compounded trauma. When a loved one goes missing or is murdered, Indigenous families require expanded access to Indigenous women-led programming and culture-based supports to navigate the justice system, as the process of seeking "justice" can often be re-traumatizing.

ONWA supports the implementation of a Red Dress Alert but also calls on government to **urgently increase investment in the prevention of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals** in the first place. Immediate action is needed now – the 231 Calls to Justice must be implemented, including core funding for Indigenous women's organizations that will enable them to undertake the necessary policy, program and legislative work that will ensure changes are made to systems which continue to perpetuate violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals. A Red Dress Alert is

a necessity because Canada is not a place of safety for Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals. When Indigenous women's right to safety is realized, an alert system will not be needed.

Recommendations

The key goals of the Red Dress Alert should be to:

- **Increase the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals** – create an avenue where inter-agencies work together to support Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals and prioritize their safety.
- **Provide immediate and coordinated systems response** – alert the public, communities, service organizations, and law enforcement when an individual is reported missing, increasing the likelihood of a safe and timely recovery.
- **Improve data collection and analysis** on MMIWG2S to enable informed decision-making, resource allocation, and policy development to address underlying issues. Make data available to Indigenous women's organizations, urban Indigenous organizations, and other community agencies.
- **Increase public awareness** of MMIWG2S, and work towards preventing future cases through education, outreach, and advocacy.
- **Provide community-based alternatives to police reporting and enable community organizations (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) to support in the search** – many families will not go to the police because of historical mistrust of law enforcement by Indigenous communities and families of MMIWG2S in responding to missing persons. The goal is to create a safe environment.
- **Improve accountability and access to justice** – hold systems (e.g. law enforcement) accountable for investigations into cases of missing Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals.

The following elements are central to an effective Red Dress Alert system:

- **An Indigenous-led system** – family, friends and Indigenous communities and organizations should have the ability to issue alerts.
- **Consideration for both a voluntary (opt-in) app for public and non-voluntary alerts** (e.g. push out notifications via SMS) when needed and identify criteria for each. The voluntary opt-in app would help prevent an inadvertent increase in anti-Indigenous racism (alert fatigue).
- **Two-tier approach** – a regional alert to allow community supports to be involved in the search with immediate national/cross-jurisdictional notification and scale up if needed.
- **Adequate resourcing** for development and operation so existing resources within communities are not further strained.
- **Access to culturally relevant, wrap-around supports** for families and survivors.
- **Annualized investments** in Indigenous women's organizations supporting families and survivors and providing gender-based violence prevention programming.
- **Public education** to increase awareness of MMIWG2S, the colonial roots of violence, and why a dedicated alert system is necessary. We want to ensure that alerts do not exacerbate anti-Indigenous gendered racism.
- **A national oversight and accountability mechanism**, such as an Implementation and Review Committee inclusive of Indigenous women's organizations, to inform implementation and

provide ongoing monitoring to determine what is working well, best practices, and improvements needed.

- **Development (and resourcing) of local coordinated community safety strategies** that focus on the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals.
- **Preventing further harm** by considering scenarios where an alert might not achieve the goal of increased safety – e.g. when a woman is exiting a human trafficking situation, and their trafficker reports them missing.
- **Retaining the Red Dress symbol** to maintain the focus on Indigenous women, girls, and 2S individuals. Indigenous women’s issues are too often sidelined, and space is not provided for concentrated efforts on the issues impacting them.

Indigenous women, girls and 2S individuals, like all people, have a right to be safe. ONWA encourages Canada to apply a gender-based lens to the Red Dress Alert and work with Indigenous women’s organizations on its design and implementation. In addition, ONWA continues to strongly recommend the immediate implementation of the Calls to Justice.

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About the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA)

The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) is the oldest and largest Indigenous women's organization in Canada. ONWA was established as a not-for-profit organization in 1971 to empower and support all Indigenous women and their families in the province of Ontario through research, advocacy, policy development, community development and culturally grounded programs. Ending violence against Indigenous women and ensuring equal access to justice, education, health services, environmental stewardship, and economic development sit at the cornerstone of the organization. ONWA has over 50 years of experience in amplifying Indigenous women's voices and advocating for solutions created and led by Indigenous women and their organizations.

ONWA is both an association with 13 Chapters (incorporated Indigenous women's organizations providing front-line services) and 23 Councils (grassroots Indigenous women's groups supporting community development models) and a direct, front-line service provider delivering over 66 critical services/programs/projects for Indigenous women and their families in 23 sites across the province. This includes numerous programs designed to holistically address the multiple forms of violence against Indigenous women, including family violence, sexual violence, human trafficking and exploitation, and support for families of Indigenous women who are missing or murdered.

ONWA celebrates and honours the safety and healing of Indigenous women and girls as they take up their leadership roles in the family, community and internationally for generations to come. We advocate for increasing Indigenous women's healing and safety on a physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental level. For over 50 years, ONWA has been at the forefront of efforts to improve Indigenous women's safety and end family violence within Indigenous communities. ONWA's groundbreaking research report, [Breaking Free \(1989\)](#), revealed that 8 out of 10 Indigenous women in Ontario had personally experienced family violence. Since then, we have continued to raise awareness at the provincial and national level of the complexities of violence from Indigenous women's perspective and to put forward solutions, through reports such as the [Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Indigenous Women \(2007\)](#), [Journey to Safe Spaces \(2019\)](#), and [Reconciliation with Indigenous Women \(2020\)](#). One lesson we have learned is that violence against Indigenous women in Canada is systemic and perpetuated by systems intended to serve them and by communities meant to protect them. ONWA also recognizes that Indigenous women are the medicine needed to heal ourselves, families, and communities.