

April 11, 2024

MMIWG RED Dress Alert

Background

This past year the Government of Canada passed a motion led by Leah Gazan, MP NDP, to fund a Red Dress Alert system that will inform the public when an Indigenous women, girl, or Two-Spirit or gender-diverse person goes missing. The motion to create the Alert was unanimously supported by Parliament in May 2023.

From our understanding, it is currently expected that the Red Dress Alert will reside with Emergency Preparedness. While the federal government is continuing to fund the standing Federal-Provincial-Territorial-Indigenous table on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQI+ People, the government has not yet made a clear funding commitment to this process.

MP Gazan herself has noted that the government of Canada announced \$724.1 billion for initiatives addressing MMIWG in 2020. Though it is now 2023, “They’ve only spent 5% of that funding.” (<https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/ottawa-honours-red-dress-day-advocates-call-for-funding-red-dress-alert/>)

In December 2023, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada was informed that Crown-Indigenous Relations Canada will be holding roundtable consultations to hear perspectives about the Red Dress Alert. These meetings will be facilitated by Hilda Anderson-Pyrz and Sandra DeLaronde, as well as Leah Gazan (M.P.) and Pam Damoff (M.P.). Pauktuutit participated in this process and spoke to this initiative in January, 2024.

The following is a written submission prepared by the Violence and Abuse Prevention and Justice policy team, in consultation with Pauktuutit Board Members who have reviewed the content and contributed their insight and perspectives.

RED Dress Alert - Inuit Women’s Perspectives

We support the immediate implementation of all Calls to Justice. However, we feel that the timeline of this consultation is neither respectful of the subject matter being addressed and the trauma that comes with these discussions, nor the organizations and communities being consulted. There is a general sense that this initiative is being rushed; we hope that this is the first step, not the only step, in consultation with Indigenous organizations and Inuit women in particular.

As we know, MMIWG is an ongoing genocide that has not diminished since the Inquiry and throughout the year of 2023 there was little progress made on the Calls to Justice. Though the steps to end MMIWG have been laid out for some communities, the Inquiry process did not adequately address the experiences of Metis, Inuit and Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people and as such, many of the initiatives coming from this process fail to reflect these diverse realities.

This is again true in the case of the proposed Red Dress Alert. This Call does not adequately reflect or address the experiences of Inuit women and cannot be implemented alone but must be supported by and implemented alongside the other Calls to Justice. This initiative demonstrates again that Inuit women must be involved in the design and implementation of MMIWG responses if they are to meet their needs.

Foremost, the Red Dress Alert fails to account for the lived realities of Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse people in Inuit Nunangat. This initiative requires the engagement of significant infrastructural, service-based resources, and cross-jurisdictional cooperation that Inuit across Inuit Nunangat have been denied for decades. Most prominently, the Red Dress Alert fails to recognize that Inuit access to internet, cell phones, and emergency services is limited and under-resourced, that police services and community policing are inadequate and often unresponsive, and that mental health and community support service to address trauma relating to MMIWG are not in place.

While this initiative will attract attention to the issue of MMIWG, we know from our own experience and the experience of our community members that a significant barrier to ending violence against Indigenous women is police misconduct. Across Canada, police fail to respond to family and community concerns, dismiss reports, delay action, and commit fewer resources to cases involving Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people. This is also true for Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

We have heard again and again, from community members across Inuit Nunangat and from police officers themselves, that the laws in place to protect Inuit are not being implemented. Police routinely fail to act on third party reporting, dismiss women and girls reports of threats and violence, and become less responsive as cycles of violence escalate.

A pressing question is who will be making the call to issue an alert and what criteria will be used to make this call. How will current gaps in infrastructure and services or jurisdictional lines impact expected delays in getting information out to Canadians? What criteria will be used to determine Alert status, and will this criteria be cognizant of the needs of women fleeing violence? And who will be there to support Inuit communities through the trauma of these Alerts?

Overall, we are concerned that the Red Dress Alert, implemented in isolation of and before supporting Calls to Justice, will not adequately respond to Inuit experiences of MMIWG, particularly in Inuit Nunangat.

We hope that ongoing consultation will address and allow for elaboration on these concerns and others listed below:

- How will this initiative help or reflect the experiences of Inuit who are not adequately served by emergency services, who have limited cellular or internet access, and whose ability to connect to, inform, and receive these alerts may be limited, delayed, or nonexistent?
- While it is important to highlight every case of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit and gender diverse people, how will this Alert support broader conversations around MMIWG as an ongoing systemic crisis? Will these Alerts be recorded over time or contribute to an ongoing record of MMIWG in Canada?
- There are many Indigenous and Inuit women who are missing and whose cases are inactive. How will this initiative reflect Inuit women that are lost to institutional violence or whose deaths have been wrongfully categorized as accidents, suicide, or non-suspicious deaths and are not part of MMIWG discussions? Where do those who are already missing fit into this initiative?
- Who will report cases to the Alert system? Will this be a community driven Alert system, or will the system be directed by police services that are already failing in their duty?
- How will Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples who are unhoused, missing but unaccounted for, missing from child welfare placements, and unlikely to be report missing be captured by the Red Dress Alert?
- How will this initiative be responsive to the experiences of Inuit women and girls who are away from Inuit Nunangat in the south while seeking services, fleeing violence, in transit, or moving through urban spaces where they may be undercounted and underrepresented?
- How will Indigenous peoples who are negatively impacted by the re-traumatization of the Red Dress Alerts in their communities and Inuit across Canada and Inuit Nunangat be supported? Will access to mental health services be provided alongside this initiative?
- Will this initiative be implemented alongside intersecting Calls to Justice such as:

Health and Wellness

3.3 We call upon all governments to fully support First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities to call on Elders, Grandmothers, and other Knowledge Keepers to establish community-based trauma-informed programs for survivors of trauma and violence.

3.5 We call upon all governments to establish culturally competent and responsive crisis response teams in all communities and regions, to meet the immediate needs of an Indigenous person, family, and/or community after a traumatic event (murder, accident, violent event, etc.), alongside ongoing support. (p.180)

Justice

5.5 We call upon all governments to fund the provision of policing services within Indigenous communities in northern and remote areas in a manner that ensures that those services meet the safety

and justice needs of the communities and that the quality of policing services is equitable to that provided to non-Indigenous Canadians. This must include but is not limited to the following measures:

i With the growing reliance on information management systems, particularly in the area of major and interjurisdictional criminal investigations, remote communities must be ensured access to reliable high-speed Internet as a right. (p. 183)

5.7 We call upon federal and provincial governments to establish robust and well-funded Indigenous civilian police oversight bodies (or branches within established reputable civilian oversight bodies within a jurisdiction) in all jurisdictions, which must include representation of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people, inclusive of diverse Indigenous cultural backgrounds, with the power to:

i Observe and oversee investigations in relation to police negligence or misconduct, including but not limited to rape and other sexual offences. (p. 184)

Calls for Justice for Inuit

16.5 Given that reliable high-speed Internet services and telecommunications are necessary for Inuit to access government services and to engage in the Canadian economic, cultural, and political life, we call upon all governments with jurisdiction in Inuit Nunangat to invest the infrastructure to ensure all Inuit have access to high-speed Internet.

16.6 We call upon all governments and Inuit organizations to work collaboratively to ensure that population numbers for Inuit outside of the Inuit homeland are captured in a disaggregated manner, and that their rights as Inuit are upheld. These numbers are urgently needed to identify the growing, social, economic, political, and cultural needs of urban Inuit. (p. 202)