



ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA CHIEFS

Written Brief for the Standing Committee on the Status of Women Committee for its Study on Implementing a Red Dress Alert in Canada

April 11, 2024

Submitted To:

Standing Committee on the Status of Women
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6
Canada

Submitted By:

Grand Chief Cathy Merrick
Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs

The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) facilitates political action and technical work on common issues. Representing 62 of the 63 First Nations in Manitoba, the AMC serves as a platform for discussion, coordination, and consensus-building, integrating both political and technical institutions. The AMC focuses on devising collective political strategies and mechanisms for coordinated action by First Nations and their organizations. Its mandate includes promoting, preserving, and protecting Aboriginal and Treaty rights, affirming sovereignty, self-determination, and self-government, and strengthening and restoring the foundations of First Nations cultures and societies.

Throughout its history, the AMC has been an active advocate for missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls. Initiatives have ranged from Chiefs-in-Assembly resolutions calling for inquiries and advocacy for long-term funding for support services to community mobilization activities. This included research and engagement with First Nation families whose loved one had gone missing or was murdered, First Nation Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and the creation of a coalition of service providers that lead to the AMC's final report, *Families First: A Manitoba Indigenous Approach to Addressing the Issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, contains recommendations proposing tangible immediate and long-term systemic solutions to address MMIWG by respecting families and cultural traditions. This process identified ways to address the needs of families and determine solutions to the systemic issues contributing to violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada.

Notably, *Families First* informed and made a significant part of the AMC's contributions to the MMIWG National Inquiry, which included calling for the development and implementation of a missing persons alert system. The AMC, through its First Nations Family Advocate Office, also played a pivotal role in advocating for the inclusion of child welfare issues in the National Inquiry.

In practical terms, the implementation of a Red Dress Alert for AMC member First Nations faces significant challenges:

- Many northern, remote and isolated First Nations, including some in the south lack reliable cellular network and internet connectivity, hindering the dissemination of alerts and communication efforts, and have limited access to transportation and resources due to limited access to transportation and resources;
- Language barriers further exacerbate the challenges, with diverse populations in Manitoba requiring alerts and information to be communicated in multiple languages to ensure accessibility and comprehension; and
- a lack of adequate policing, security, and support systems tailored to address violence against First Nation women, girls, and two-spirit individuals.

It is imperative that culturally sensitive approaches are deeply integrated into every stage of the alert system, spanning from its initial development to its execution. This holistic approach is crucial to ensure that the distinct needs, values, and perspectives of AMC member First Nations are not only recognized but also prioritized throughout the process. By embedding cultural sensitivity into the foundation of the alert system, we can foster greater trust, inclusivity, and effectiveness in serving the diverse and unique requirements of First Nations in Manitoba.

To effectively address these challenges and ensure the success of a Red Dress Alert system in Manitoba, the initiative for First Nations must be driven and delivered by First Nations. This consistent with UNDRIP and the MMIWG National Inquiry. Federal and provincial governments must forgo a colonial mindset that forces First Nations leaders to seek permission from the state and advocates for an end to the exclusion of First Nations women and girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. A genuine partnership must exist between First Nations and all crown representatives, emphasizing the importance of respecting First Nations' self-determination in all aspects. Additionally, it stresses the prioritization of solutions originating from First Nations that are sustainable and equitably resourced. I informed the CIRNAC Minister of the AMC Chiefs-in-Assembly resolution “First Nations control of MMIWG” in my attached December 11, 2023 letter.

Sadly, AMC member First Nations and the AMC have not been engaged or involved in discussions on the Red Dress Alert, and conveyed in my attached December 12, 2023 letter to the CIRNAC minister. When the Red Dress Alert “Engagement Session Summary” was presented at the February 2024 National Indigenous-Federal-Provincial Territorial Roundtable on MMIWG2S+, it clearly indicated that neither AMC member First Nations nor the AMC was involved. Tataskweyak Cree Nation Chief Tarelee Beardy was present at that Roundtable to put forward AMC’s position, but she was denied the opportunity to fully present and was shut down by the facilitators and was told to “wrap up” when other participants were given much more time to speak. I relayed that to the CIRNAC Minister in my attached February 2, 2024 letter.

Moving forward, the AMC Chiefs-in-Assembly continues to seek to work with Canada to implement the Calls for Justice, including on an alert system for missing AMC member First Nations citizens that is inclusive of all genders. This would include:

- empowering First Nations with legislative authority to oversee and execute alerts;
- administer necessary mechanisms such as policing and special operations units dedicated to searching for missing individuals;
- establishing protocols for collaboration and information-sharing between police and First Nations authorities and external agencies, local law enforcement that respects First Nations data sovereignty and follow the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP) with search and rescue teams and government agencies,

and, in extreme circumstances, granting power of attorney to extend search efforts beyond cold cases;

- First Nation involvement and input, including with decision-making, policies, and initiatives regarding missing persons alerts are guided by the input and involvement of First Nation families;
- Staff and policing involved in the alert system must demonstrate awareness, respect, and consideration for the cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices of First Nations;
- First Nations-specific trauma-informed approach;
- Prioritize a comprehensive approach to health and wellness including the holistic well-being of families impacted by missing loved ones;
- Advocate for social justice and provides educational opportunities, training programs, includes preserving and passing on traditional knowledge, skills, and cultural practices related to safety, awareness, and education.

In closing, the AMC seeks to work with Canada to develop an alert that promotes healing, and ensures safety, and prioritizes all missing AMC member First Nation citizens. Ekosani.