

**Melanie Morrison,
Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Impacted Family
Member
Submission to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women Study
on Implementing a Red Dress Alert in Canada
April 15, 2024**

Need for a Red Dress Alert system in Canada

The need for a national Red Dress Alert system in Canada is rooted in my lived experience and expertise as an impacted family member of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit and gender diverse people (MMIWG2S+):

- Stereotyping and Mismanagement: The initial response to the disappearance of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people is often marred by stereotypical views held by the police, who often assume they have simply gone out partying with friends. This type of response suggests a systemic issue where Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people are not taken seriously when they are reported missing, leading to delayed and often inadequate investigations.
- Delayed and Ineffective Responses: The delays in searching for, investigating, and locating missing Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people underscore the inefficacy of the initial search and investigation. A specialized alert system could prompt a more immediate and focused response from law enforcement, potentially saving lives and bringing swift closure to families.
- Lack of Coordination Between Police Forces: There is often a lack of coordination between different police jurisdictions — from local police to the Sûreté du Québec, as an example. A national system could help bridge these gaps, ensuring better communication and resource sharing across jurisdictions.
- Cultural Insensitivity: The handling of cases involving Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people often lack cultural sensitivity and understanding. A Red Dress Alert system could be part of a broader strategy to educate and train law enforcement on cultural issues, reducing biases and improving the handling of such sensitive cases.
- Public Awareness and Engagement: The tragedy MMIWG2S+ is not just a family or community issue but a national crisis. A Red Dress Alert system could raise public awareness, similar to Amber Alerts, making it a national priority and encouraging community and nationwide vigilance.
- Reconciliation and Hope for Change: Implementing such a system could also be seen as a step towards reconciliation, recognizing the systemic injustices experienced by Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+. It can be a concrete action that brings hope that change is possible and that the lives of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people are valued.
- Preventative Impact: By establishing a high-profile and effective alert system, potential perpetrators might be deterred by the knowledge that disappearances will trigger an immediate and significant response.
- Advocacy and Empowerment: A Red Dress Alert system would also empower Indigenous families and communities, giving them tools and a formal mechanism to advocate for their missing loved ones and engage with law enforcement on equal footing.

The establishment of such a system would practically demonstrate a commitment to addressing the long-standing issues of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people in Canada. It's a step towards acknowledging and addressing the systemic inequalities and ensuring that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people are not forgotten.

Recommendations for a National Red Dress Alert System in Canada

To create an effective national Red Dress Alert system in Canada for addressing the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, several key recommendations can be proposed based on the experiences shared by Melanie and the broader concerns raised by Indigenous communities. Here are some targeted recommendations:

- Rapid Response Protocols: Establish immediate and mandatory protocols for law enforcement to follow when an Indigenous woman, girl, or 2SLGBTQQIA+ person is reported missing. This would

include predefined actions within the first 24 to 48 hours, which are critical in missing persons cases.

- Community Involvement: Engage Indigenous communities, especially impacted families of MMIWG2S+, survivors of gender- and race-based violence, and Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, in the design and implementation of the alert system. Community patrols and local volunteers could play a significant role in the early stages of the search.
- National Coordination and Communication: Ensure that there is seamless communication and coordination between local, provincial, and national police forces. This would involve the integration of databases and communication systems to track and share information about cases across jurisdictions effectively. It is important to ensure the province of Quebec also provides services in English.
- Education and Training: Implement ongoing training programs for police and other first responders on cultural sensitivity and the specific challenges associated with cases involving Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people. Training should also focus on combating stereotypes and biases that may hinder investigations.
- Public Awareness Campaigns: Use the Red Dress Alert system as a platform for public awareness campaigns that educate Canadians about the issue, encourage vigilance, and foster a greater understanding of the societal impacts of these tragedies.
- Holistic, Wraparound and Culturally Based Support Services: Provide comprehensive support services for the families of MMIWG2S+, including counseling, legal assistance, and liaison officers who can help navigate the complexities of the justice system that are holistic, wraparound, and culturally based.
- Review and Accountability Mechanisms: Establish independent review mechanisms, which includes impacted family members, survivors of gender- and race-based violence, and Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, to oversee how cases are handled, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement in the system.
- Technology and Innovation: Leverage technology to enhance the alert system, such as using social media for rapid dissemination of information, developing apps that could help in reporting and tracking cases, and using data analytics to predict and prevent potential abductions or murders.
- Legislative Support: Secure the necessary legislative backing to ensure that the Red Dress Alert system has the authority and resources it needs to be effective. This may include specific laws to enhance the protection of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people.
- Inclusive Policy Making: Continuously involve Indigenous voices, impacted family members, survivors of gender- and race-based violence, and Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, in the policy-making process to ensure that the system reflects their needs and realities.

Implementing these recommendations would not only potentially decrease the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls but also signify a significant step toward justice and reconciliation.

Melanie Morrison is Mohawk from Kahnawake and has been a tireless advocate for MMIWG2S+ when her sister went missing in 2006 and whose remains were found in 2010, a murder that remains unsolved to this day. Melanie is also a Board of Directors member and Treasurer for the National Family and Survivors Circle Inc.