

When a Loved One Goes Missing

**A Quick Reference Guide
for Families of Missing
Indigenous Women: What to
Do in the First 72 Hours**



National Indigenous Women's Resource Center

This pocket guide is a part of our **MMIW Toolkit for Understanding and Responding to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women for Families and Communities**. The toolkit includes a downloadable PDF of this pocket guide, a customizable missing persons flyer, an MMIW awareness poster for tribal programs, and an online database of local emergency contacts, hotlines and other resources, which can be accessed online at **niwrc.org/mmiwtoolkit**.

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A Quick Reference Guide for Families of Missing Indigenous Women: What to Do in the First 72 Hours

This quick reference guide is designed as a tool for families and advocacy organizations to respond when a Native woman goes missing. It provides specifics about what immediate steps to take in the first 72 hours, especially if there is no law enforcement response.

Note: This resource is not designed to address how to respond when someone 17 or younger goes missing, as it involves a unique set of laws, policies and other resources. Please view *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* online at bit.ly/3kAclST.

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Time is of the essence when someone you love goes missing. Do not delay –

take these four important steps in order to make every second count:

- 1. Contact local law enforcement**
- 2. Gather and track additional information**
- 3. Preserve important evidence**
- 4. Enlist the immediate help of your family, community or victim services program**

Step 1: CONTACT LAW ENFORCEMENT - DO NOT WAIT

Contact local law enforcement immediately, unless you know that the missing woman voluntarily left to get away from an abusive or dangerous situation. If 911 emergency services are not available in your location, call whatever law enforcement agency you would contact for any other type of life-threatening emergency. In addition, contact the law enforcement agency in a different area if you believe the woman

went missing somewhere else. When you contact police, tell them that you need to file a missing persons report. There is no required amount of time you must wait in order to file a missing persons report. It is important to share with the police as much detail as possible to help identify your loved one, including:

- Full name, any nicknames or aliases they might be using
- Date of birth
- Descriptive physical features (ex. height, weight, hair color, eye color)
- Any identifying marks, such as tattoos, birthmarks, or scars
- What the individual was wearing when they disappeared
- Whether the missing person has a medical condition that requires regular treatment or medication (ex. if she is pregnant)
- If you suspect she was stalked or lured away via Internet (ex. Facebook, Twitter), share with

local law enforcement so that they can consider asking the FBI for assistance with a possible trafficking or Internet-related crime.

Do not wait to gather more information before taking this critical first step. You can fill in any missing details later. When you speak with law enforcement, ask for the officer's name, badge number, telephone number, and police report number and note this information so you can follow up.

A missing woman could be transported across tribal, county, state lines or even international borders via plane, train, car, bus, or boat. Consider contacting and sharing your missing person flyer with the following agencies to be on the lookout for your missing person:

- local department of transportation,
- train and bus stations,
- port authorities,

- airports, and
- border control.

The Missing Indigenous Sisters Tools Initiative (MISTI) created a free, 45-page search workbook geared toward families of missing Indigenous women. Use the workbook, or even a simple notebook, to keep all of the important information about the missing person in one place for easy reference. Download the workbook at bit.ly/MISTIworkbook.

Step 2: GATHER AND TRACK ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

After you've notified the police, start thinking about any potential leads and write them in your notebook. You can reconnect with law enforcement when you have additional information, such as:

- Where was your loved one last seen?
- Were they with someone at the time? If it was a stranger, describe

the stranger as best you can.

- If the missing person was alone at the time, who did they last see or speak with? Note that individual's name, phone number, address, and any other important information.
- What is the missing person's tribal affiliation/enrollment?
- Is their vehicle also missing? If so, provide a description of the vehicle, including make, model, color, year, and license plate number, if known.
- Did your loved one leave behind anything important, like their phone, keys, wallet, or ID?
- Do they suffer from any illness or condition that might make them a danger to themselves or others?
- Have they been abused or received any threats of harm? Is the missing person afraid of anyone? Did they witness a crime or are they involved in a new or ongoing dispute?
- Have they been acting outside of

their normal pattern of behavior, such as missing work or not picking up their children from school?

- Make a list of the places they frequent, such as work, school, grocery stores, restaurants/bars, parks, and any other regular stops.
- Make a list of the friends and family members they regularly see or communicate with, including their contact information.

Step 3: PRESERVE IMPORTANT EVIDENCE

Preserving evidence can be critical to ensuring that materials and information can be used in the search for your loved one, and, if necessary, in a criminal prosecution. While waiting for law enforcement to arrive:

DO NOT:

- Touch or move anything before law

enforcement arrives

- Tidy or clean up their home, vehicle, or the area where they were last seen – dusting, cleaning, or throwing things away may remove fingerprints or discard important evidence
- Delete or alter any call history, text messages, social media accounts, cell phone images, or web browser history. Law enforcement may request bank records, social media account information and cell phone records.

DO:

- Limit access to the area where they were last seen
- Take photos of the area, if possible
- Jot down notes of everything you can remember from immediately before your loved one went missing

Step 4: ENLIST HELP

Contact friends, family, and co-workers to see if they know the missing person's whereabouts, and log those conversations in your notebook. You can also ask for help with specific tasks such as:

- Calling churches, hospitals, jails, and homeless shelters
- Designing an easy-to-read, attention-grabbing flyer
- Include the word "MISSING" in big, bold text
- Include a recent, clear photo of her
- Add a physical description
- Include any known circumstances of her disappearance, such as date or location
- Don't forget personal contact information and law enforcement contact information
- Posting copies of the flyer in high-traffic areas
- Managing social media
 - Consider creating a public Facebook page to share

information widely or utilizing multiple platforms (ex. Instagram, Twitter, etc.)

- Using hashtags to raise visibility
- Contacting the local news
 - Note: There are benefits and drawbacks to using both social and news media, so be sure to weigh the increased visibility with the potential intrusion on your family's privacy. Consider designating a spokesperson for the family as an option.
- Organizing a search
 - Coordinate with law enforcement to avoid duplicating efforts
 - Identify local search resources available (ex. volunteers, dog searches, boats, etc.)
 - Solicit and register the names and contact information of all volunteers
 - Communicate with volunteers

in advance about suggested items to wear/bring in order to stay safe and healthy, given the weather, terrain, and time of day

- Separate the search area into “grids” and assign teams (not individuals) to each grid
- Brief the group in advance with helpful tips about preserving evidence, spacing and speed of volunteers, and other expectations for a successful search

This quick reference guide is designed as a starting point for families, communities and advocacy organizations to respond when a Native woman goes missing. Our expanded **MMIW Toolkit for Understanding and Responding to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women for Families and Communities** can be accessed online at niwrc.org/

