

Kansas House Judiciary Committee
Kansas State Capitol, Room 346-S
Wednesday, February 19, 2020

Testimony of Liana Onnen,
Member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas
On HB 2646

Honorable Chairman Patton and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2646. This bill would work to address some of the key problems in solving the current crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women/people (MMIW/P) across America. Currently, there is a need for jurisdictional coordination, communication, and education. By coordinating trainings between the Four Tribes in Kansas, The Kansas Bureau of Investigation, Kansas law enforcement, and other state agencies involved in addressing missing and murdered indigenous people in Kansas, we can ensure our state is doing what it can to protect its Native American citizens.

For those who may not know me, please allow me to introduce myself briefly. My name is Liana Onnen, and I am an enrolled member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas. I am also the former Chairwoman for the Prairie Band Potawatomi, having served one, 4-year term. In that time, I was very actively involved in finding solutions to jurisdictional hurdles through communication and coordination. My understanding of the complexities of these issues was enhanced by my election and service to the National Congress of American Indians Executive Committee as Regional Vice-President of the Southern Plains, representing tribes in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. I continue to work with and for tribes in Kansas and across the country as a consultant and as an advocate for Native American issues.

The legislation is incredibly relevant at a time when the crisis of MMIW/P is being recognized across not only America, but across all of North America. It has received such attention that President Trump has implemented a task force on missing and murdered indigenous peoples. The "Operation Lady Justice" will be committed to collaboration and data collection, which are two of the biggest obstacles in getting a grip on the current crisis. Another obstacle is the intense jurisdictional maze that can often result when an indigenous person is missing and/or murdered. Education, communication, and coordination regarding these jurisdictional complications can only begin when dialogue begins.

Without adequate coordination and data collection, it is nearly impossible to assess, let alone begin to seriously address, the MMIW/P crisis. This bill helps us to begin to address this issue by having all relevant parties involved in investigating, coordinating and educating one another as to what the problems specifically are and how we can begin to coordinate effectively and overcome these obstacles to bring our mothers and daughters and sisters home.

We are often asked, "What data can you use to support this?" That is the problem. There is very little. Whether it is because of lack of proper identifiers on paperwork (i.e. "white," "black," "Asian" "other" with no "Native American" option") or lack of sharing data across jurisdictional lines to have a database center, the data simply does not exist because it is not being collected. But when taken as a whole, when considering the data we can gather, there are over 5,000 MMIW/P currently in America. That we know of. I find that disturbing for a population that represents only 1% of the total American population.

These are the facts about MMIW/P crisis. Now, I ask that you recognize the face of a potential victim. Because of my work, because of my advocacy, I often travel around Kansas, both in rural and urban areas. I also often travel across the United States. Regionally, I drive, because I am from the Midwest and if it is less than 10-hours, it is just a "short drive." I also often fly, relying on taxis, Uber, etc. for transportation in strange cities, or renting cars and driving alone to reach rural areas. Because of the nature of my work and advocacy I am often alone, in Indian Country and urban centers where human trafficking and incidents of MMIW/P may be higher due to a higher indigenous population being targeted. There are places where, if I were to go missing, it is likely my case could be dismissed by local law enforcement due to my identity as Native American, or they may fail to identify me as Native American, they may fail to understand the importance of cross jurisdictional communication in such a case. Because of these kinds of things and the lack of communication and understanding, it is entirely possible, my case could be forgotten. And some of those places could be right here in Kansas.

Most all of us here advocating for this bill know someone, or are related to someone, who has gone missing, is still missing, or has been murdered. This is our truth and our reality. This bill takes the first step in ensuring that those who have gone missing, been murdered, or remain missing, have some sense of justice and it is the first step in ensuring that our brothers and sisters today will be protected and counted in the future.

I sincerely thank you for your time and consideration, today. I will stand for questions if there are any.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Liana Onnen".

Liana Onnen,
Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas,
Tribal Member