FORT DEFIANCE, Ariz. — The 25th Navajo Nation Council's Naabik'íyáti' Committee Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives Task Force partnered with the Navajo Nation Police Department Missing Persons Unit to conduct the first annual Missing Persons Day Event held on Nov. 4 at the Window Rock Administration Building.

Members of the MMDR Task Force, including Chair Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Cove, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Red Valley Tse'alnaozt'i'i', Sheepsprings, Beclabito, Gadiiahi/To'Koi) were joined by Speaker Crystalyne Curley (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain), and Madam Vice President Richelle Montoya who also spoke at the event.

"For families like Ashlynne Mike's, for all families of the missing, we need a system that will be responsible. We need coordinated efforts, training, funding, and all law enforcement to come together to look for our relatives," Crotty said.

The Navajo Nation Police Department Missing Persons Unit was established in 2022 under the guidance of Navajo Police Chief Daryl Noon to tackle the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women from a centralized force. Noon also created the Navajo Patrol Detective Unit, the Missing Person Liaison, and Public-Safety Answering Point Supervisor position within the NNPD. These positions and units were created in response to the high rates of missing Indigenous persons.

"I don't shy away or make excuses for the NNPD of the past. For the future NNPD, we are striving to be better every day," Noon said.

The Law Enforcement community was well represented in the joint effort including Noon, NNPD Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Liaison Reycita Billie, Gallup Police Department Lieutenant Mark Spencer, Captain Lauren Milligan of New Mexico State Police, U.S. Assistant Attorney Eliot Neal, Navajo Nation Criminal Investigations, Navajo Nation Police Missing Persons Unit, New Mexico State Police, Gallup Police Department, Albuquerque Police Department, Farmington Police Department, Gallup-McKinley County Investigation Office, Mark Pooley, FBI, U.S. Marshalls, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons Systems, Coconino County District Attorney's Office, Coconino Victim Advocates, advocates from the community, and families of missing relatives.

The event allowed families of missing relatives to have one-on-one time with law enforcement to report, provide information, or obtain an update on an existing case. The event also provided valuable access to various national and local resources that were available to assist.

On-site DNA swab collection was available to the families as a voluntary option, to be cross-referenced through NAMUs, a national centralized repository and resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases across the U.S.

Several families joined the event and brought handmade picture collages of their missing relatives as a reminder that they are not forgotten. Some families took advantage of the DNA swab collection in hopes of finding a match to their missing relative and meeting with support services, victim advocates, and the Department of Social Services.

Sgt. Andrea Tsosie of the Gallup Police Department informed the attendees that her department is prioritizing their missing persons cases. Tsosie explained the hindrances that exist with cross-jurisdiction limitations for cases outside of Gallup. This is often the situation for cases on Tribal lands, where law enforcement relies on various other agencies to timely relay information to the assigned jurisdiction.

Mark Pooley, originally from Ganado, Arizona, is a retired Sergeant of the Tempe Police and a former owner of a 501c3, Native Search Solutions. Utilizing his law enforcement experience in investigating homicide missing person cases, Pooley cross-referenced facial recognition and big data to locate matches of missing persons.

In the two years that his non-profit was in operation, Pooley worked with over 70 families in seven states and in Canada, Italy, and Mexico, noting that missing persons cases are a worldwide epidemic.

"Two things that every missing person unit should have for successful recovery are resources and technology. If you don't have both, I promise you will not find a missing person," Pooley said.

Pooley is now the Director of Investigative Support at the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification, where he utilizes DNA to identify unknown remains through a grant provided by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The missing and unidentified human remains grant is a three-year opportunity providing free DNA testing for missing Native American and Alaskan Native People.

He collaborated with medical examiners in Coconino County, Maricopa County, Pinal County, and the states of New Mexico and Oklahoma, discovering hundreds of Native American remains that could not be identified and remain untested and held as evidence. Pooley stated that this situation is a sad reality that he and others are dedicated to address so families can finally have closure.

"In this short [time] that I have been doing this, I have worked with medical examiners, and law enforcement from federal, state, local, and tribal communities," Pooley said. "The awareness is increasing, and the momentum is building because of the families and grassroots efforts. To my colleagues, in this line of work, it can get emotional. Please take care of yourself and keep going until we find all of our relatives."

The MMDR also serves as a resource to collaborate with law enforcement on local, state, and federal platforms and to assist families with resources for victim advocates, behavioral health and other resources as they navigate through these uncertain times.

"Throughout Indian Country, we need to start being a part of the discussions of how to bring our relatives home. I commend the critical work of the Diné Action Plan and Tribal Response Plan; we all need to come together as three branches to lead the effort in unity," Curley said. "Thank you to all of the advocates and law enforcement for being here today. My hopes and prayers are with the families."

Written by gallupsun
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