



## YUROK TRIBE

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Yurok Tribal Court, SBI release progress report on pivotal project**

*Tribal Court funds the development on first-ever database on MMIWG2 in California*

Today, the Yurok Tribal Court, in partnership with Sovereign Bodies Institute, released an early progress report on a three-year project involving the development of the first database on missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two spirit people (MMIWG2) in California.

The To' Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-Wo-Chek' (I will see you again in a good way) Project also aims to establish a more effective system of investigation surrounding MMIWG2 cases as well as an enhanced level of protection for Native women, girls and two-spirit individuals living in the state.

“Currently, there is a scarcity of accurate data on Native, MMIWG2 victims and survivors in California and everywhere else in the United States. The databases that do exist are largely inaccessible to tribes and are woefully inadequate when it comes to tribal populations,” says Yurok Chief Justice Abby Abinanti, who is also a former San Francisco Superior Court Judicial Officer. “Parallel to the database component of this project, we are creating a cooperative plan that seeks to mobilize tribal, county, state and federal agencies in response to future MMIWG2 cases. I would like to thank the Tribal Court and SBI staff as well as all of the families and law enforcement representatives who contributed to this report. Together, we have a lot better chance of addressing this indelible issue.”

“Similar to the Yurok Tribe, tribes across the state have the capacity to positively influence the resolution of MMIWG2 cases,” adds Frankie Myers, the Yurok Tribe’s Vice Chairman. “I am confident that the collaborative approach called for in this report will facilitate real progress toward preventing future tragedies. We hope tribes across the US will one day use this project as a model to achieve justice for victims, survivors and their families.”

"I am blown away by the strength and bravery demonstrated by all of the families and survivors that took part in this project. Our hope is that this report will bring healing to all of those who are impacted by MMIWG2 by bringing real change to societal and governmental institutions. For far too long, California has been left out of

the national MMIWG2 dialogue,” explains Annita Lucchessi, the Executive Director of the Sovereign Bodies Institute. “This report is a call to action and a template for our communities. We know that innovation and resilience are skills within all Indigenous communities and it is those skills that will bring our relatives home.”

Since the Gold Rush, tribes in California have lost countless women, girls and two-spirit individuals to violence. Most commonly, these crimes are perpetrated by non-Indians and away from tribal jurisdictions. These incidents impact every aspect of tribal communities, ranging from an increased need for services for survivors and their families to heightened strain on tribal law enforcement. The Yurok Tribal Court initiated the ‘To’ Kee Skuy’ Soo Ney-Wo-Chek’ Project to improve outcomes of MMIWG2 cases in the state and eventually the entire United States. There are more federally recognized tribes and tribal citizens in California than any other state.

The Yurok Tribal Court contracted with Sovereign Bodies Institute (SBI), a Native American-owned non-profit research center dedicated to gender and sexual violence against Indigenous peoples, to collaboratively compile and analyze data on past and ongoing MMIWG2 incidents. This builds on over five years of work Sovereign Bodies Institute has done to build a MMIWG2 database spanning the Americas. SBI manages the much-needed database, which is available to tribes, Indigenous service providers, and other relevant stakeholders upon request. It will also assist Tribal, county, state and federal law enforcement agencies in recording and resolving cases.

Currently, a trio of databases track missing persons cases, including the federal government’s National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), which until recently, did not make victims’ tribal affiliations accessible. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children is similarly lacking as is the State of California’s version of this digital tool. According to the SBI report, 62% of all missing Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in the state are not documented in any of these data repositories.

Working with Yurok Tribal Court attorneys and administrative staff, SBI researchers, including Dr. Blythe George, a Yurok citizen who recently earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University’s Sociology & Social Policy Program, have assembled and evaluated 165 MMIWG2 cases for this first-year report. The multidisciplinary team also interviewed numerous survivors and their families. With consent, their stories will be used to inform law enforcement, legislators and court officials as well as direct service providers and others about the many facets of this issue.

In addition to creating the comprehensive database, the project endeavors to introduce a formal protocol, integrating tribal, county and federal law enforcement resources into the response to MMIWG2 cases. The first recommendation is for local and federal law enforcement agencies to form cooperative agreements with their tribal counterparts. In conjunction with clarifying jurisdictional concerns up front, this will ensure that an adequate quantity of personnel is dedicated to these cases, 97 percent of which occur outside of tribal law enforcement jurisdictions.

The Yurok Tribal Police Department cross-deputization agreements with the Humboldt and Del Norte County Sheriffs’ Offices are used as an example of positive working relationships among law enforcement agencies. The agreements authorize Yurok officers to enforce all state laws. These pacts are especially important in California and directly pertain to MMIWG2 because of Public Law 83-280. This antiquated piece of federal legislation applies in only nine states and confers jurisdiction over major crimes to non-tribal law enforcement. Since this bill was passed in 1953, it has severely limited the amount of federal funding available to expand tribal police departments.

There is also a need for state courts to strengthen relationships with tribal courts. Specifically, the report calls for an expansion of concurrent jurisdiction arrangements, such as the joint Family Wellness Courts led by Yurok Chief Justice Abinanti and the presiding judges of Del Norte (Judge Darren McElfresh) and Humboldt (Judge Joyce Hinrich) Counties. In the report, Chief Justice Abinanti suggests that state courts institute a

special, recurring proceeding for dependency cases involving foster children who have a missing or murdered parent. Court intervention will ensure that children receive the care they need when they need it most. Tribal law enforcement, courts and attorneys can also assist in the successful investigation/prosecution of perpetrators and with connecting survivors with culturally appropriate services.

The To' Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-Wo-Chek' Project is funded by US Department of Justice's Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (CTAS) grant. A similar progress report will be released yearly until the project is finalized in 2022.

**The Yurok Tribal Court is a branch of the tribal government. The main role of the Court is to apply and interpret Yurok laws to resolve disputes or disagreements that are brought before it. These matters can include civil disputes, child custody and support, divorce, civil infractions or code violations, guardianships of children, children in need of aid (child welfare), restraining orders, criminal, and probate matters. The Court also has various tribal programs to assist tribal community members who are involved in matters related to the application of the various justice systems including the various court system or who may be at risk of becoming involved.**

The [Yurok Tribe](#) is currently the largest Tribe in California, with more than 6,000 enrolled members. With approximately 600 employees, the Tribe provides numerous services to the local community and membership. The Tribe's ancestral territory comprises 7.5 percent of the California coastline, spanning from the Little River to the south and Damnation Creek to the north. The eastern boundary is the Klamath River's confluence with the Trinity River.

Sovereign Bodies Institute (SBI) builds on Indigenous traditions of data gathering and knowledge transfer to create, disseminate, and put into action research on gender and sexual violence against Indigenous people. SBI encourages families and survivors to contact the organization if they would like to be interviewed for the next publication as part of this multi-year project. SBI also connects Indigenous MMIWG2 survivors as well as their families with support services and can be reached at [mmiwdatabase@sovereign-bodies.org](mailto:mmiwdatabase@sovereign-bodies.org). For more information about SBI, please visit [sovereign-bodies.org](http://sovereign-bodies.org) or call (707) 335-6263.