

**Dr. Grace Bulltail statement to U.S. Department of Justice Operation Lady Justice
Listening Session May 9, 2020.**

My niece Kaysera Stops Pretty Places had just turned 18 years old went missing in Big Horn County, Montana in late August. Big Horn County has the most reported cases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in the state of Montana, and among the highest rates of MMIW in the U.S. When we reported Kaysera missing, there was no missing person's report filed. When her body was discovered in Hardin 5 days later, she remained unidentified for 2 weeks. Her mother went to the funeral home also run by the county coroner and she was told that the body of her daughter was not there. We continued to report Kaysera missing to Big Horn County (BHC) law enforcement who still did not ever file a missing report for her. There was no report of the discovery of Jane Doe body in the media or by law enforcement.

After learning that the crime lab took two weeks to identify Kaysera, and that the county coroner had taken her remains before she was identified, that the turmoil in the BHC sheriff's office led to delays in investigating, and that no one in our family was interviewed about her death even after she was identified, I have no other conclusion to come to other than the law enforcement did not care to give Kaysera the dignity of treating her as a human being, let alone a girl that was a victim of crime. She did not choose to end up deceased in a stranger's yard only to be discovered several days after she died. Based on my family's interactions with Big Horn County and the Montana Department of Justice (MT DOJ) they do not care and can't be bothered. Kaysera's death is not their problem. If the weak link in this system is law enforcement that needs to be addressed in your task force with people who oversee justice in Montana.

Days before she went missing, Kaysera had filmed and posted to social media the beating of her 15-year-old brother by law enforcement at Crow Fair. The officers beating a minor who was in a wheelchair at the time included Big Horn County deputies. As a result of the footage, an investigation was conducted by the U.S. Attorney's Office Civil Rights Division and officers were reprimanded. Again, no one in our family, not a legal guardian, or the minor victim were interviewed or asked to give testimony about this event. We have reason to believe a BHC deputy under investigation was a responding officer to the scene when Kaysera's body was discovered. Assistant U.S. Attorney Lori Suek informed me that we will have to submit a FOIA for the investigation proceedings. I have disclosed this information to Montana MMIP Coordinator Ernie Weyand in both written and verbal statements.

Our family has had to navigate this unjust system on our own with no advocacy from any task force. We have pushed back, marched, protested and demanded that the county and state do more or even do something. We have repeatedly asked our Montana elected officials for help from the Montana Attorney General to U.S. Senators and calls for assistance have gone unheard. In response to the march and rally for Justice for Kaysera shortly after her funeral, the BHC attorney announced the formation of the county murdered persons task force. Essentially the county attorney would be taking over investigations of suspicious deaths. Well here is the reality of this; the county attorney is not an investigator, he is not a medical examiner and forensic expert. How does he presume that he can complete the duties of these other departments and specialists while acting as the attorney? This is the kind of irresponsible foolishness my family continues to encounter from the county attorney and officials. The entire county law enforcement has already grossly mishandled Kaysera's case, it should not be an experimental trial case for the county attorney's ill-equipped task force.

I filed a complaint to the Montana state board of funeral services against the license of county coroner and funeral director Terry Bullis. Kaysera's mother was told by Terry Bullis that Kaysera's remains would have to be cremated in order for our family to receive them. Cremation is against our cultural beliefs, not to mention we did not have a cause of death. In addition, he told our family that the autopsy report would come back and show cause of death as "exposure as a result of substance or alcohol use". Terry Bullis did not disclose that he took Kaysera's remains from the crime lab before the pathologist had identified her body. The sheriff's office stated that Kaysera's remains had to be taken back to crime lab with a police escort. I am awaiting the state board's review of the complaint and investigation to receive more information about the two week period when we had not been notified of Kaysera's death. Terry Bullis has been reprimanded by the state board for violations involving another Indigenous woman in Big Horn County.

The medical examiner at the state crime lab, Dr. Robert Kurtzman finally returned my call and answered my questions about Kaysera's autopsy and the chain of custody of her remains. Dr. Kurtzman also shared that the county attorney had been ordering extensive toxicology tests looking for any drug that can possibly be tested for because the county attorney indicated he suspected drug use. Absolutely no sign of drug use was found. Kaysera is a victim of a crime. Despite the victim blaming narrative of the county attorney in charge of the investigation in Big Horn County.

Meanwhile, our families are left with no police reports and no answers. Our families must seek information from dismissive elected officials, without any support from the designated task force. The Big Horn County attorney made our family wait 15 weeks for an autopsy report. Now, he refuses to speak with us and will not release any additional information. Due to the coroner's actions, we were not able to give Kaysera a proper burial. We must fight for any information we can receive on her case.

Even after U.S. Attorney General Barr announced the formation of the Operation Lady Justice task force on MMIW two months after we learned of Kaysera's death, nothing changed for our family's quest for answers and justice. As Montana is a priority, I reached out to the US Attorney's office asking for assistance from the federal MMIW task force. I was eventually connected to the MMIP coordinator in Montana who told us that they had to defer to Big Horn County officials.

In October 2019, Melissa Schlichting, Assistant Attorney General of the MT DOJ, told me that her department could not do anything unless the county asked for assistance. Well, the county finally did ask, and the MT DOJ told them no. The Assistant Attorney General said that the MT DOJ Department of Criminal Investigation did not have the capacity to investigate Kaysera's case after they had accepted a more recent MMIW case in Big Horn County. What happens then? The county admits they cannot investigate, the BHC attorney is in over his head with his ill-equipped county murdered persons task force and is ready to hand it over to those who can adequately work the case. And now all the MT DOJ can tell me is that the BHC is in charge of the investigation? What about the FBI? Where is the US DOJ MMIP specialist who I have also spoken to several times?

I asked the Assistant Attorney General what the Montana task force can do for us. She said that her role was to inform legislation on the issue and that the members would be submitting a report within the year. *I am still asking what can anyone do to help us?* Jurisdiction is problem for

many MMIW cases in Big Horn County. However, Kaysera was found in Hardin, less than half a mile from the Crow reservation this should be less of a jurisdictional issue for the state agency to help us.

Montana has the Missing Indigenous Persons, MMIP, task force. There is no advocacy for murdered Indigenous people in the Montana Department of Justice. We need actual advocacy. The objective of Montana's task force is not to give our girls justice. Even the next phase of the states missing persons task force, according to their own website, has no intent to address murdered Indigenous people. How convenient for the state task force to have the misleading acronym MMIP, Montana being substituted for murdered, this is accurate and appallingly strategic.

Our girl is not a missing person anymore, she is a murdered person and we need assistance. And I am wondering will the state MIP and the USDOJ task force reports include the shortcomings with the justice system, that really are just excuses to our family, for not doing anything about Kaysera's death?

Here is something constructive, make recommendations for addressing this broken system that COULD help MMIW families. Create an advocate and fund a system that will do just that, who will reach out to families, that will be made aware of the Jane Does missing and located near tribal communities, the burden should not be solely on grieving families. And yes, we that have had to be our own advocates will be here pushing you to do right by our girls every step of the way.

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