

Blackfeet Missing Murdered Indigenous People Safe Search Protocols

By Rhonda Connelly

When a loved one disappears, it is important to act quickly and begin the search immediately. The Blackfeet MMIP SAR team has coordinators who help community members communicate with tribal law enforcement and connect families with resources.

The first step is to report the missing person as soon as possible in the jurisdiction where they were last seen. Sharing a missing person poster on social media and keeping in contact with law enforcement or case workers can increase the chances of finding your loved one.

The following steps are recommended by MMIPMT.com for searching in larger metropolitan areas:

1. Create an MMIP poster

Create a missing person poster that can be shared in the area where the person disappeared and on social media. To make the poster, gather:

- Recent photos
- Full name
- Height, weight, age
- Hair color, eye color, body build, and physical description
- Vehicle license plate number and photo of the vehicle, if available
- Hometown and state
- Place Last Seen
- Phone number of the police station or investigator
- Clothing last seen wearing
- Information about glasses, tattoos, scars, or other identifying features
- Where they were last seen and places, they frequently visit

The poster should be uploaded as a PDF so it can be easily shared and printed. If appropriate, include mental health information that may help with the search. If you need help creating a poster, send two recent photos to your Blackfeet MMIP coordinator or the person who received your report.

2. Share the poster with media outlets

Forward the poster to media outlets in the city where your loved one is missing.

3. Prepare a search team

Organize a search team to visit areas where your loved one may be located. This may require travel expenses, lodging, food, and a detailed plan. Use this information to prepare a budget and submit it to Blackfeet MMIP for help find resources.

4. Build a search plan

Your plan should include:

- Printing flyers for distribution
- Searching last known locations, when it is safe to do so
- Staying in contact with law enforcement

Your search may include:

- Homeless shelters
- Tent cities
- Crisis centers
- Treatment centers
- Correctional facilities
- Hospitals

Law enforcement can also work with hospitals and correctional facilities.

5. Map your route and build your team

Plan your search route, organize your team, and wear clothing that identifies who you are and what you represent. Always be aware of your surroundings and use the buddy system. If places you plan to visit have contact numbers or social media pages, post or forward your flyer and follow up with a phone call. Prioritize areas where the person is most likely to be found.

6. Keep a written log

Create a written log of contacts that provide productive leads or may be helpful in future search efforts.

7. Post flyers in public places

When visiting search locations, ask about hanging flyers in places such as:

- Gas stations
- Post offices
- Churches
- Libraries
- Hospitals
- Soup kitchens
- Homeless shelters
- Hiking trails
- Parks
- Other locations frequented by the local community

8. Mark searched areas

Use a physical map to mark the locations that have already been searched and coordinate that information with your team.

9. Stay in contact with law enforcement

Let law enforcement know if you plan to visit areas where you may not have phone service or locations where you may feel vulnerable, such as homeless camps.

10. Combine search information

After completing your initial search, combine maps from all team members, note any sightings by date and location, and share the information with law enforcement or the case worker.

11. Share helpful contacts

If individuals have been helpful with flyers, information, or searches, forward their information to Blackfeet MMIP for future reference.

12. Regroup if needed

If you are mentally and physically exhausted, regroup, reassess, and create a new plan before continuing the search.

Phase Two

Phase Two includes revisiting social media posts, contacting local media with updated posters, and searching for new information. Any leads gathered should be forwarded to law enforcement.

Create a contact list of all places visited for weekly follow-up. Also decide whether you have the resources and capacity to continue the physical search. In some cases, distributing more flyers in certain areas may be more effective than continuing to search in person.

Resources

Blackfeet MMIP works directly with supporters who help Native and Caucasian families in Montana conduct community searches in both urban and reservation areas by providing direct assistance to individuals leading the search for their missing loved ones.

Direct payments may be made to help cover the costs of a thorough community search, such as:

- Gas money
- Meals
- Hotel stays
- Tools such as metal detectors and drones
- Targeted awareness campaigns

Montana Missing Persons Database

Phone: (406) 444-1526

Email: MNCMEC@mt.gov

BIA Missing Persons Unit

Email: OJS_MMU@bia.gov

Searching for a Loved One

When a family member goes missing, it can be confusing and extremely stressful. You are not alone.

National hotlines can provide support over the phone and through chat services. These conversations are confidential and anonymous and may connect you with state or local resources.

Resources for Victims

- **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children:** 800-843-5678
- **Teen Dating Abuse Helpline:** 866-331-9474
- **TTY:** 866-331-8453
- **National Runaway Safe line:** 800-786-2929
- **The Hotline:** 800-799-7233 | www.thehotline.org
- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** 888-373-7888
- **TTY:** 711
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** 988
- **Sexual Assault Hotline:** 800-656-4673
- **Strong Hearts Native Helpline:** 844-762-8483
- **NamUs Unidentified Person System:** 833-872-5176

The First Days After a Disappearance

When a loved one goes missing, time is critical. Contact local law enforcement as soon as possible to file a report. This is especially important if the person has health issues, disabilities, impairments, or medication needs.

Local Law Enforcement Contacts

- **Browning Blackfeet Police Department:** 406-338-4000
- **Cut Bank Sheriff's Department:** 406-873-2711
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation Field Office:** 406-248-8487
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation:** 202-324-3000
- **Bozeman:** Services Gallatin, Madison, Meager, and Park counties.

- Glasgow: Serving Daniels, Dawson, Garfield, McCone, Richland, Roosevelt, Sheridan, and Valley counties.
- Great Falls: Serving Cascade, Chouteau, Judith Basin, and Teton counties.
- Helena: Serving Beaverhead, Broadwater, Deer Lodge, Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Powell, and Silver Bow counties.
- Kalispell: Serving Flathead, Lake, Lincoln, and Sanders counties. Missoula: Serving Granite, Mineral, Missoula, and Ravalli counties.
- Shelby: Serving Glacier, Pondera, and Toole counties.
- Havre: Serving Blaine, Hill, Liberty, and Phillips counties.

FBI field offices in Montana:

- Browning & Shelby: 406-424-8411 / 406-248-8487
- Missoula: 406-549-7696
- Bozeman: 406-994-0927
- Kalispell: 406-755-8131
- Helena: 406-443-3617
- Great Falls: 406-453-9619
- Havre: 406-265-7181
- Butte: 406-782-2304
- Glasgow: 406-228-2533

Non-Emergency Reporting

Contact the law enforcement non-emergency number in the location where the person went missing.

If the person went missing on tribal land, contact the tribal police department if there is one, or your local police department and ask to report a missing person. If the person went missing outside tribal boundaries, contact the police department in that area. If you are unsure who to contact, call the local police department or county sheriff's office for assistance.

Filing a Missing Person Report

You can file a missing person report in person, over the phone, or online. Provide as much information as possible, including:

- Recent photo
- Full name, nickname, and aliases
- Tribal affiliation
- Home address
- Date of birth and age at disappearance
- Gender and biological sex, if different
- Detailed physical description
- Date and time of disappearance
- Clothing or accessories worn
- Last known location
- Who they were last seen with
- Likely destinations, such as favorite places, work, or school
- Previous missing episodes and how they were resolved
- Medical or behavioral health information
- Disability, physical or mental
- Vehicle information or other transportation methods
- Personal items left behind
- Social media usernames, email addresses, and phone numbers

If law enforcement seems unwilling to help or is confused about jurisdiction, file a complaint with the supervising authority.

Please make sure you receive a case number after filing the report. This number is important when requesting financial support or search assistance.

Collecting and Sharing Information with Law Enforcement

Families can help the investigation by:

- Talking with family, friends, and others who may know something
- Sharing social media usernames and handles
- Writing down new information in a notebook, phone, or tablet
- Gathering recent photos
- Securing areas such as a bedroom or bathroom if law enforcement needs to collect items for the investigation

Law enforcement will use the information you provide to help search for your loved one. However, they may not be able to share all details of the investigation if doing so could harm the case.

If you believe law enforcement is not doing enough, first speak with supervisory staff, the police chief, or the sheriff where the person was reported missing. If more help is needed, contact local media, elected Tribal, state, or federal representatives, or consult with a civil attorney.

Supporting the Search

Families have the right to search for their missing loved one. If you conduct your own search, maintain open communication with law enforcement before, during, and after the search, especially if evidence may need to be preserved.

Families may need support from people who can:

- Coordinate with law enforcement
- Manage volunteers
- Arrange food and shelter
- Work with victim service providers

Some searches may require specialized equipment and volunteers, including:

- Horse and rider teams
- Foot search volunteers
- ATVs

- Boats
- Divers
- Sonar equipment
- Planes
- Helicopters
- Drones

Work with law enforcement to connect with professional search teams or search for organizations in your area. Some may volunteer their time and expertise.

During a search, law enforcement may contact hospitals, jails, medical examiners, or coroner's offices. Hospitals may not be able to share information due to confidentiality laws, but law enforcement can sometimes obtain information when there is a safety concern.

Law enforcement may also enter the missing person's information into the National Crime Information Center to connect with law enforcement across the country.

Creating a Missing Person Flyer

A missing person flyer can increase awareness both online and in the community. Sharing a digital flyer on social media can quickly reach a wide audience.

If distributing paper flyers, post them where the person was last seen and in places they usually visit, such as:

- Shopping centers
- Bus stops
- Parks
- Tribal centers
- Gyms
- Restaurants

If you need help with printing costs, some local businesses may discount or donate printing.

Include on the flyer:

- Name
- Recent photo
- Date of disappearance
- Gender and biological sex, if different
- Physical description
- Identifying marks, scars, tattoos, or other unique features

Do not include:

- Home address
- Personal phone number
- Personal email address

Instead, use the law enforcement agency's preferred contact number. You may also want to create a separate email address for the search effort.

A flyer template is available in the appendix. You can also create a printable poster through the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). For assistance, contact 833-872-5176 or namus@usdoj.gov.

Using Social Media

Posting the missing person's flyer on social media can spread awareness quickly and encourage community involvement.

Best practices:

1. Coordinate with law enforcement before posting, if they are involved.
2. Decide what information should be public and keep sensitive details private.
3. Consider creating a separate social media account for the search.
4. Share the law enforcement non-emergency number or tip line instead of personal contact information.
5. Assign one family member or friend to manage posts.

6. Include a direct request for people to share the flyer or call with tips.
7. Share only photos of the missing person.
8. Use relevant hashtags to reach more people.
9. Ask online missing person groups in your area to share the flyer.

Be aware that social media may bring negative comments. You do not need to respond to harmful comments, and you can delete them. Also, be cautious of scammers who may try to exploit the disappearance for money.

Contacting the Media

Contacting local media can help raise awareness, especially early in the search. You can share the flyer and ask that the information be included in a story or broadcast.

When contacting media:

1. Coordinate with law enforcement first, if possible.
 2. Decide what information should be shared publicly.
 3. Share the non-emergency number or tip line, not personal contact information.
 4. Choose one family member or spokesperson to communicate with the media.
 5. Ask reporters to encourage the public to call police with any tips.
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When Searching in Larger Metropolitan Areas

When a loved one disappears in a metropolitan area, it is important to act quickly. Report the case as soon as possible in the jurisdiction where they were last seen. Share posters on social media and work closely with law enforcement or case workers.

In larger cities, consider the following:

1. Create a poster for use in the area and online.
2. Forward the poster to media outlets in the city.
3. Prepare a search team and budget for travel, food, and lodging.
4. Search safe last known locations and other likely places, including shelters, treatment centers, correctional facilities, and hospitals.

5. Map your route, organize your team, and use the buddy system.

If a location has a phone number or social media presence, share or forward the flyer and follow up with a call.

Intentional Disappearance and Confidentiality

A loved one may intentionally leave home without telling family or friends where they are going. People may do this for many reasons, including escaping a volatile or abusive situation.

In cases involving domestic violence or sexual violence, confidentiality may be essential for safety. Shelters and service providers may not be able to share a person's location without consent.

If an adult is found alive, they must consent before law enforcement can share their location with family. Family members may ask law enforcement to pass along a message asking the loved one to contact them, but the person is not required to do so.

Cold Cases

It is heartbreaking to think of the many unsolved murders and missing persons cases affecting the Blackfeet Reservation and beyond. Cold case programs can help solve violent crimes, including homicides and sexual assaults.

Advances in DNA technology now allow forensic testing of evidence that may once have seemed unusable. The National Institute of Justice supports law enforcement agencies by helping them analyze cold case evidence and strengthen investigations.

Best practices for cold case units include:

1. Determining the needs and scope of the unit
 2. Designing the unit
 3. Implementing the unit
 4. Operating the unit
 5. Identifying support through law enforcement and academic partnerships
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Awareness

When hosting awareness events, invite neighboring reservations and allies. These events can help bring attention, support the Blackfeet Nation, and strengthen community involvement in MMIP efforts.

These events tell the stories of Native community members who have gone missing or been murdered and highlight the barriers Native communities face in seeking justice.

Examples of awareness events include:

- **MMIWP 5K / 1-Mile Run**

To honor the victims of missing and murdered people.

- **BLKFT BC MMIP Event**

An event to raise awareness and encourage discussion about MMIP, including a panel discussion with women working to end human trafficking and violence against all people.