

Indian Country Today

May 11, 2007

American Indian Women Not Served by Justice Department

By David Melmer

MCLAUGHLIN, S.D. – Amnesty International played a trump card for American Indian women across the country with a recent report that found indigenous women were not served properly by the U.S. Department of Justice in cases involving violence.

The report stated that “Native American and Alaska Native women in the United States suffer disproportionately high levels of rape and sexual violence, yet the federal government has created substantial barriers to accessing justice.”

Women, the report noted, do not get a timely, if any, response from law enforcement; may not have forensic medical exams available; and most always never see their cases prosecuted. Jurisdiction is a problem. Neither county, state nor tribal authorities know who has jurisdiction over a case. It depends on whether the male is American Indian and whether the incident took place on or off the reservation.

The AI report, “Maze of Injustice – The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA,” points out injustices at all levels of government from the U.S. government to the tribal level.

Statistics are also hard to come by. Many people who work as advocates in the efforts to eradicate or lower violence claim that most rapes are not reported in Indian country because of fear of retaliation or public scrutiny. On the Pine Ridge Reservation, for example, the IHS does not have a rape test kit available. Most women travel to Rapid City, up to 120 miles away, to report a rape that will be counted as a statistic for Rapid City, which has the highest per capita rape rate in the country.

The AI report covered three areas: Oklahoma, Alaska and the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

“We wanted Amnesty [International] to come because it could provide us with empowering the people to see what is going on in Indian country and goes on throughout the country. It’s difficult for Native women to get justice through the federal system,” said Georgia Little Shield, director of the Pretty Bird Woman House in McLaughlin on Standing Rock Sioux.

She said more money needs to be put into law enforcement. On Standing Rock there are seven BIA law enforcement officers and sometimes just one on duty at a time.

“Congress is spending money for wars; they are cutting back on federal grants. We are losing advocates and losing services. We need to tell Congress there is an issue here,” Little Shield said.

Standing Rock had no anti-domestic violence programs before the Pretty Bird Woman House opened two years ago. Before, people didn't trust the authorities, so violent behavior went unreported; but since the program has started, there is a 24-hour crisis line, mostly operated by Little Shield, and the program just received its 501 (c)3 status so it can accept donations.

The shelter is a somewhat run-down apartment building that was donated by the Bear Soldier community at McLaughlin. There are two bedrooms, a roof and heat. There is no money to operate because the program just received nonprofit status. Little Shield was paid until April 30, which should have been her last day, but she stayed on as a volunteer. The crisis line is operated out of her home.

Since the AI report came out and a Web site to assist Pretty Bird Woman House was established, the program has received \$17,000 and more is coming in, Little Shield said.

The program receives about 50 crisis calls per week. In the first year, with education programs in the schools and elsewhere, nearly 400 women came forward asking for more information and help.

The justice system will have to change, according to Little Shield, because more and more families on the reservations are integrated and that creates jurisdictional problems. On reservations, state and county authorities have no jurisdiction over non-Indians; conversely, the reservation authorities have no jurisdiction over non-Indians while on the reservation either. The federal government does, but is lacking the manpower and resources to help, the report concluded.

The ultimate goal of Pretty Bird Woman House is to have a program like that on the Pine Ridge Reservation operated by Cangleska Inc., Little Shield said.

“It will take time. We've gotten this far in two years,” she said.

To make a donation to Pretty Bird Woman House, visit <http://prettybirdwomanhouse.chipin.com/pretty-bird-woman-house>.

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