

FIRST PERSON: MINNESOTA FORMS NATION'S FIRST TASK FORCE ON MISSING AND MURDERED BLACK WOMEN

Group will guide Legislature on new policies to reduce violence, racial disparities



by Minnesota Rep. Ruth Richardson
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For decades, a disproportionate number of Black women and girls have gone missing across this country. There is a clear crisis, with more than 64,000 Black women and girls missing in the United States.

Even more concerning is what we see lacking in the response — a dearth of media coverage, a limited use of law enforcement resources and little legislative action. For instance, a 2015 study found that Black children made up 35 percent of missing-person cases, but only received 7 percent of media references.

Research also shows that Black girls are more likely to be classified as runaways rather than as victims of foul play.

Why does this matter?

First, children classified as runaways don't prompt AMBER alerts, the emergency-messaging system used when law enforcement determines that a child has been abducted and is in imminent danger. (More than 1,000 children have been rescued specifically because of these alerts.)

Second, runaway cases receive

significantly less media attention.

Third, what happens in the first 48 hours of a person going missing is critical. Intense early coverage of cases provides the greatest chance of recovery. Local and national media coverage and police involvement are critical to recovering missing persons.

Unfortunately, the data demonstrate that Black women and girls are disproportionately disadvantaged on both fronts. Cases involving Black women and girls remain open and unresolved four times longer than cases involving White women.

GIVING VOICE TO THOSE CLOSEST TO THE PAIN OF THIS CRISIS

Behind the data are real people and families that have been devastated by this crisis.

During the 2021 legislative session, I introduced the historic HF 952, a bill to create the nation's first state-level Task Force on Missing and Murdered African American Women. In doing so, I wanted to center the experience and stories of impacted families.

Lakeisha Lee and her mother, Marquita Clardy, testified before our Minnesota House Public Safety Committee about how their 18-year-old sister and daughter, Brittany, went missing in 2013. Their testimony was powerful and heartbreaking. Lee and her mother reached out to police right away when Brittany went missing, but were told she probably just ran off with her boyfriend.

Her mother was adamant that something was wrong. Brittany was not answering her phone. In the world of technology, they reached out to all of her friends and logged into her social media accounts but could not find a trace of her. The family undertook its own investigation. Working with an

auto dealer who had recently sold Brittany a car, the family eventually tracked down the vehicle.

Brittany was found dead in the trunk of the vehicle 10 days after the family's initial report had been made to police.

I am still haunted by Marquita Clardy's words as she implored for support of HF 952 and tearfully shared that she wakes up every day wondering if Brittany would be alive today had that initial police response been different.

VALUING LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS

Minnesota is unique among state legislatures. We are the only divided state legislature in the nation — a Republican-led Senate and Democrat-controlled House. Every single bill that we pass and get signed into law must truly be bipartisan.

Our efforts to build that kind of support for HF 952 began in the summer of 2020 during my first term, when I served as chief author of a resolution (HR 1) declaring racism a public health crisis.

With passage of that measure, Minnesota became the first state where a legislative chamber had adopted a bipartisan resolution declaring racism a public health crisis and established a Select Committee on Racial Justice.

I had the honor of serving as co-chair of this select committee.

Its subsequent work proved to be critical — especially our decision to make the experiences and voices of community members front and center, and then complementing this powerful testimony with data on racial disparities.

That was our same approach to finding consensus on HF 952: give legislators on both sides of the aisle the opportunity to hear the powerful stories and real-life experiences of our fellow Minnesotans. (Under the leadership of Sen. Mary Kunesh, a similar strategy was used successfully to establish a new Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Task Force.)

In addition to the compelling testimony of Brittany's family, we heard the perspective of law enforcement (Suwana Kirkland, president of the National Black Police Association) and of an on-the-ground activist (Artika Roller, executive director of the

ABOUT MINNESOTA'S NEW TASK FORCE ON MISSING AND MURDERED AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

- ✓ created with this year's passage of HF 63 (during special session)
- ✓ includes four legislators, representatives from law enforcement, prosecutors, a coroner, and advocacy groups for victims of violence
- ✓ studying systematic factors and underlying causes of disproportionately high levels of violence against African American women and girls
- ✓ exploring policies related to policing, child welfare, coroner practices, and the investigation and prosecution of cases
- ✓ reviewing measures to reduce violence and to help victims, their families and communities
- ✓ will make recommendations to Legislature by Dec. 15, 2022



Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault).

A strong case for HF 952 was presented to the House Public Safety Committee, which unanimously approved the measure. Ultimately, it was included in our omnibus public safety bill (HF 63 from this year's special legislative session).

While Minnesota is the first state to create a task force to develop a comprehensive road map and recommendations for addressing the crisis of missing and murdered Black women and girls, it should not be the last.

In our pursuit of a just society and inherent struggle to live up to the promise of us all being created equal, we have significant work to do to ensure that our systems are operating in ways that value Black women and girls' lives equally to their White peers.

We can and must do better. It is a matter of equity. It is a matter of justice.

Minnesota Rep. Ruth Richardson was first elected to the House in 2018. She is a 2019 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).

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SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

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