

STOP VAWA Success Story  
Native American DV Fatality Review Team  
MBCC July 2014

Since 2003, MBCC has funded Montana's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission with STOP dollars. This multidisciplinary group of 18 professionals travels around the state twice per year looking into killings between intimate partners. Although a majority of states have fatality review teams, Montana's has received national attention for a variety of reasons. These include the team's willingness to travel to the community in which the killing occurred, meeting with local professionals involved in the investigation while there and interviewing family members of both the victim and perpetrator.

One more unique element of Montana's DV review team has been its work in Indian Country. Native Americans are the state's largest minority or "underserved" population and it has been essential for the statewide team to review deaths in Reservation communities. During the first 10 years of its work the state team identified a disproportionately high number of intimate partner homicide deaths involving Native Americans.

Combining the recognized, thorough work of the statewide team and the tragedy of numerous Indian Country deaths, the Department of Justice's Office of Consumer Protection & Victim Services (OCPVS) undertook the process of putting together a second statewide team. This team would be made up primarily of Native Americans and their federal partners (FBI, US Attorney's Office, Bureau of Indian Affairs) and would review exclusively those deaths involving Native perpetrators and/or victims.

Recruitment and training of potential team members took place over the past year, culminating in their first DV fatality review in March 2014. Using the template of the existing team allowed the start-up process to move quickly, as the Native American team adopted many policies and protocols used by the statewide team. Members of the non-Native team served as mentors and guides to new team members which helped tremendously in preparation of the first review. A second review is scheduled for October 2014.

It is clear that without the history, success and support of the fatality review team that VAWA dollars have funded in Montana, the creation and implementation of the Native American team would have been considerably more difficult. The new team received the early and enthusiastic support of Attorney General Tim Fox, US Attorney Mike Cotter and the office of Congressman Steve Daines, primarily based on the reputation of the existing team which is headquartered in AG Fox's office.

The speedy development and early success of the team have already begun to attract national attention. Dr. Neil Websdale, director of the National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative based in Flagstaff, AZ trained Montana's initial team and attended March's Native American review. He has spoken highly about both projects in a variety of venues. He is interested in replicating Montana's model in Arizona, New Mexico and other states with significant Native American populations. Additionally, OCPVS has submitted a presentation proposal focusing on the Native American fatality review to December's Indian Nations Conference.

STOP VAWA dollars which support Montana's DV fatality review team continue to provide for nationally recognized, innovative work in the area of intimate partner homicide. That support has now taken on a new direction in our state, once again charting new ground and setting a new standard of excellence. The results of MBCC's support will continue to have positive consequences around our state and across the country.