STATEMENT OF
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL


Last week I was in Prior Lake, Minnesota, where I spoke to a group of women from Tribal Nations. It was a privilege to talk to them about the Federal Communications Commission. But to be honest, it was not immediately clear to those assembled why I was even present. This was not a group accustomed to having the leadership of a regulatory agency with responsibility for communications technology join them for their gathering. But I was there with a message of hope. Because I believe we can do something to help address the crisis of missing, murdered and Indigenous women and girls, and more broadly, the crisis of missing and endangered persons in Native communities.

So I began my remarks by talking about what is universally true—that is, when a loved one goes missing the distress is urgent and intense. It is an impossible mix of hope and despair. We hope for a swift return, so that they come home unharmed and with a chance to restore some measure of normal. But we also despair because resources may not follow, and fear emerges that maybe your loved one does not matter enough or that you will not be lucky enough to make a breakthrough in the critical day or two following their disappearance. It could break you. I know, just thinking about it as a mother, it is too much. I am fortunate that I can only imagine.

Then I moved on to the facts. The Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates there are more than four thousand cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Natives that are unresolved. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the numbers missing are more than two and half times their share of the United States population. While there are new methods to collect data on missing and endangered Tribal and Native people, the true magnitude of this problem is hard to capture through data alone.

Here is another fact. One of the most effective initiatives we have had to assist with the recovery of endangered kids are AMBER Alerts. AMBER Alerts have been around for nearly three decades. They tell us on television, radio, and wireless phones when a child goes missing. So many young people have been safely found as a result of these alerts. In fact, as you heard earlier today from Lavina Willie-Nez, her Tribe issued eight AMBER Alerts and in all eight instances the missing child was successfully recovered. AMBER Alerts demonstrate that there is a way to raise awareness when someone goes missing and increase the odds that we safely find them.

But for an AMBER Alert to go out, a missing person has to be 17 years old or younger. And roughly one in three missing persons reports are for adults. We are talking 188,000 people last year who went missing. But we do not have a tool on par with AMBER Alerts to raise awareness and assist with recovery efforts of those 18 and older. I think it would make difference if we did. Because while only one third of those who go missing are adults, they account for 70 percent of people who are never found.

Today we create a new code in our emergency alert systems for television, radio, and wireless phones to help find those missing and endangered persons that fall outside of the criteria for AMBER Alerts. This new capability—the “Missing and Endangered Persons” or MEP alert code—will sound the alarm when people are missing and endangered, help raise awareness, and support recovery.

In developing this proposal, we received so many comments. The most powerful testimonies came from Tribal communities. Their input—including from government-to-government consultations held between Tribal communities and our Office of Native Affairs and Policy—provided a voice for the murdered and missing.
I want to thank Lavina Willie-Nez, who is the AMBER Alert Coordinator from the Navajo Department of Police for her testimony supporting our efforts today. I also want to acknowledge the National Congress of American Indians for their work to pass a resolution to support the Commission establishing this new code. In addition, I want to acknowledge the efforts of members of Congress who have brought attention to this issue, including Senators Luján, Schatz, Daines, Tester, Murkowski, and Cortez Masto. Our work also owes a debt of gratitude to Native Public Media for bringing this issue to our attention. So a big thank you to Loris Taylor of Native Public Media who was instrumental in this effort, pressing us to understand the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous people and urging us at the FCC to recognize we have the power to do something about it. We do. And as a result of the action we take today, we will save lives.

I want to acknowledge the staff responsible for this effort because we are grateful for their contributions, including Alejandro Roark, Mark Stone, Aaron Garza, Theo Marcus, Wesley Platt, Kristi Thornton, Bambi Kraus, Cara Voth, and Jamie Saloom from the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; Nicole McGinnis, Austin Randazzo, James Wiley, George Donato, Drew Morin, David Kirschner, Leon Kenworthy, and David Munson from the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau; Joy Ragsdale, Joycelyn James, and Chana Wilkerson from the Office of Communications Business Opportunities; Andrew Wise, Cher Li, Susan Lee, Emily Talaga, and Aleks Yankelevich from the Office of Economics and Analytics; and Doug Klein, William Huber, Anjali Singh, Susan Lee, and Erika Olsen from the Office of General Counsel.