

# NEWS

from **NATIVE CALIFORNIA**

[www.newsfromnativecalifornia.com](http://www.newsfromnativecalifornia.com)

VOL 36 / ISSUE 3

Spring 2023



\$5.95



*New*

# FEATHER ALERT SYSTEM

## FOR MISSING INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Assemblymember James Ramos is a champion in raising public awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. He also authored Assembly Bill 1314, the Feather Alert Bill. As a member of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, Assemblymember Ramos is knowledgeable about the staggering caseload of missing people from tribal reservations and urban communities. Sponsored by nineteen assembly members and state senators (nine women and ten men), the bill was introduced in February 2022.

**On California Native American Day, September 23, 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom signed the bill and made it official.**



**“Having that conversation to help someone who is afraid because a relative might be the tribal officer in a small community is the first step.**

**We keep all conversations completely confidential and anonymous.”**

—StrongHearts CEO Lori Jump,  
Citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians

*Editor’s note: This article contains potentially triggering content.*



by  
Jeanne Ferris

**THE FEATHER ALERT IS A STATEWIDE NOTIFICATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT, THE MEDIA, AND THE PUBLIC WHEN AN INDIGENOUS**

**PERSON OR TRIBAL MEMBER IS REPORTED MISSING.** California is the third state to implement the system, behind Washington and Colorado. This alert is initiated by a local law enforcement agency, either the police or the sheriff’s department.

The bill authorizes a law enforcement agency to request that the California Highway Patrol activate a Feather Alert if specified criteria are met concerning an endangered Indigenous person who has been reported missing under unexplained or suspicious circumstances. Several factors determine when a law enforcement agency or tribal authority can activate a Feather Alert.

**FEATHER ALERT CRITERIA:**

1. The missing person is an Indigenous woman or Indigenous person.
2. The investigating law enforcement agency has utilized available local and tribal resources.
3. The law enforcement agency determines that the person has gone

missing under unexplainable or suspicious circumstances.

4. The law enforcement agency believes that the person is in danger.
5. There is information available that, if disseminated to the public, could assist in the safe recovery of the missing person.

After meeting these requirements, the investigating agency can request a Feather Alert within the appropriate geographical area to assist them with alert messages and signs. California Department of Transportation operates the Changeable Message Sign (CMS) system—the digital signs on highways and freeways—which requires the same federal authorization as radio and television alerts.

In addition to related legislative findings and declarations, the bill requires the CHP to create and submit a report to the governor’s office and the legislature that includes an evaluation of the notification system no later than January 1, 2027.

By now, most Californians know that an Amber Alert means that a child has been abducted—a tone may sound simultaneously through smartphones, radios, and televisions, signaling a report of an abduction, including a specific vehicle of interest. Amber Alerts can also be displayed visually on CMS signs.

**HOW SUCCESSFUL HAVE RECOVERIES BEEN WITH THE AMBER ALERT?**

“[There have been] 327 activations and 379 recoveries in twenty years,” Captain Ken Roberts said. “When siblings are also abducted, they count in recovery.” Captain Roberts serves as statewide coordinator for alerts with the California Highway Patrol. “My team works 24/7 [disseminating] information to determine if it fits the criteria needed for activating an alert.” Never less than two and as many as eight officers work to confirm an abduction.

**WHEN CAN I REPORT SOMEONE MISSING?**

According to the San Diego Police Department’s website, contrary to popular belief you do not need to wait a specific period of time before reporting a person missing.

**HOW DO I FIND A MISSING PERSON AND WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?**

Contact local hospitals, homeless shelters, jails, and the medical examiner’s office.

The age of the missing person determines who investigates the case. Adult and juvenile missing persons are investigated separately; check with your local law enforcement agency about which units handle missing person reports



in your jurisdiction. Be prepared to provide the name of the missing person, date of birth or age, physical description, medical information, circumstances surrounding their disappearance, and a current photograph if available.

Some of the following factors are considered when evaluating whether an individual is considered at-risk: the person is a victim of a crime or foul play; is in need of medical attention; has no pattern of running away or disappearing; is a victim of a parental abduction/kidnapping; is mentally impaired; or is a danger to themselves or others.

Based on the length of time a person is missing, there are additional resources available that the investigator assigned to the case will provide. These include family member DNA collection and dental records of the missing person. In addition, contacting the State of California Department of Justice's Missing and Unidentified Persons Section ([oag.ca.gov/missing](http://oag.ca.gov/missing)) and the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System ([namus.nij.ojp.gov/](http://namus.nij.ojp.gov/)) is recommended. NamUs provides "free database technology, forensic services, and investigative support to resolve missing Indigenous person cases, as well as murdered Indigenous person cases when the decedent's identity is unknown. In addition, they support unidentified Indigenous person cases where the decedent's manner of death is not known or was due to circumstances other than homicide. At present, NamUs participates in outreach events in tribal communities across the country. For a current number of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) missing persons cases published in NamUs, please refer to their Monthly Case Reports page here: [namus.nij.ojp.gov/library/reports-and-statistics](http://namus.nij.ojp.gov/library/reports-and-statistics)."

StrongHearts Native Helpline offers 24/7 assistance. It was founded by and for Native American women needing assistance in escaping violent partners.

"It's exciting to have this resource available, since California is among the top five states we get calls from," StrongHearts CEO Lori Jump, Citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chipewewa Indians, said. "Having that conversation to help someone who is afraid because a relative might be the tribal officer in a small community is the first step. We keep all conversations completely confidential and anonymous."

Responding to escalating domestic violence, the Canadian Women's Foundation created a hand gesture to "Signal for Help, In Trouble." It was intentionally designed as a single continuous hand movement, rather than a sign held in one position, that could be made easily visible while maintaining discretion.

In 2021, *The Guardian* newspaper reported the good news of a rescued sixteen-year-old from North Carolina who had traveled through four states with her abductor. Finally, in Kentucky, while riding in the front seat, she signaled a motorist who by chance knew what the sign meant and called 911. The police were able to implement an intervention, arrest the perpetrator, and rescue the minor.

Historically, neglect and insufficient data widened the gap between tribal communities and local law enforcement. This created an administrative black hole when a missing Indigenous person was reported. Reducing the statistics of unsolved Indigenous cases fosters an egalitarian society that features more California Natives as good news.

## "SIGNAL FOR HELP, IN TROUBLE"

1. HOLD YOUR HAND UP WITH YOUR PALM FACING ANOTHER PERSON.
2. TUCK YOUR THUMB INTO YOUR PALM.
3. FOLD FINGERS DOWN OVER THUMB



California Highway Patrol offers lectures and training to assist all communities statewide with understanding alerts.

[WWW.CHP.CA.GOV](http://WWW.CHP.CA.GOV)

StrongHearts Native Helpline

[STRONGHEARTSHELPLINE.ORG](http://STRONGHEARTSHELPLINE.ORG)  
(844) 762-8483