

**Statement of Cindy McCain**  
**on Human Trafficking of American Indian and Alaska Natives**  
**Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**  
**September 27, 2017**

Chairman Hoeven and Vice Chairman Udall, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the issue of human trafficking of American Indians and Alaska Natives. I want to also thank my husband, Senator John McCain, for his tireless work on the issues facing our Arizona tribes and tribes throughout the United States.

First, I must express my deepest appreciation to the members of the Committee and the Government Accountability Office for examining the federal government's role in reporting, investigating, and prosecuting cases of trafficking involving Indian Country. This issue does not often receive the attention that it deserves.

I would also like to acknowledge Senator Heidi Heitkamp's efforts as an anti-trafficking ally. Senator Heitkamp has traveled to Arizona, where she and I met one of our Native American service providers to discuss replicating their culturally sensitive care model in her state. Senator Heitkamp also graciously asked me to participate in an anti-trafficking roundtable in Bismarck, North Dakota, where we met with law enforcement officials and victim service providers working in the Bakken region. The remoteness of the Bakken area, the high unemployment rate of nearby Indian reservations, combined with the oil and gas boom, have created a hotbed of trafficking. Victims are mostly Native American women and girls transported to the region specifically for sex trafficking. Many of these victims are under the age of 18. Children being sold for sex. Outward and organized child abuse and rape.

Because of their exotic beauty, Native girls are also sold for a very high price on websites like [backpage.com](http://backpage.com). Backpage has been found to be complicit in writing ads that vaguely attempt to

disguise the selling of these precious children for sex. In other words, Backpage *knowingly* promotes the abuse of our beautiful Native American children along with other ethnicities. All too often they are kidnapped, sold, and transported to remote places like Asia and the Middle East. You may be asking yourself, what happens to these girls? Sadly, they are treated as disposable. They disappear at the hands of these despicable traffickers.

Human trafficking has enslaved an estimated 41 million people in the United States and around the world. Victims are used for forced labor or forced sex, and face daily physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of their pimps or strangers. In many cases, this form of child abuse is a product of organized crime. However, Native American girls and women are all too often trafficked by their own relatives.

Indian gaming and urbanizing tribes are presenting a new set of trafficking issues. I witnessed with my own eyes 6 little

girls lined up against a wall in a casino outside of Phoenix on display for customers.

These children were silent and visibly scared. I contacted hotel security. Unsure what to do, security personnel allowed the children to remain at the casino. I have found that Native Americans are largely overlooked as victims.

One of the major impediments to prosecuting individuals and criminal organizations is a lack of victims services designed by and for Native victims. Traumatized victims are seldom willing to reveal their identities or testify against their captors. However, culturally sensitive victim assistance programs can and do empower women and children to breach the shadows of this horrific underworld.

To that end, I would like to commend Chairman Hoven for reintroducing the SURVIVE Act, a bill that would set-aside \$150 million from the federal government's \$3 billion Crime Victims Fund to improve victims assistance programs for Indian

tribes. Another piece of bipartisan legislation that would help considerably to prevent trafficking is S. 1693, the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act of 2017 (or “SESTA”). Last week the Senate Commerce Committee held a hearing on SESTA and the bill currently has 30 cosponsors. I have been a longtime advocate of curtailing the ability of [backpage.com](http://backpage.com) and similar websites to sell human beings for sex online. Over 75% of trafficking victims tell us that they were sold online as easily as selling a bicycle or a sofa. It is high time that traffickers stop hiding behind the free speech curtain while mothers find their children advertised for sex online and are powerless to stop it. The Communications Decency Act was not intended to allow websites to make millions of dollars selling our children for sex.

We shouldn't stop there. I encourage Congress to consider assigning staff in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service, and their sister agencies to train Tribal leaders, elders, prosecutors, and law enforcement agents about the presence of human trafficking within their own communities. Create

awareness and victim services unique to Native Americans. My own home state of Arizona is doing just that on every reservation within our borders.

Finally, Congress must encourage tribal governments to criminalize human trafficking on their reservations rather than simply defer to federal prosecutors. I am proud to say that the Navajo Nation, the largest tribal government in the United States, recently adopted their first anti-trafficking laws. It is a start for the Navajo and should be followed by tougher tribal enforcement and cooperation with federal agencies.

On a personal note: I was born and raised in Arizona. Throughout my life, I have had the opportunity to enjoy the beauty, the unique culture, the art, the story telling and friendship of these glorious people. Their unique culture is a part of the very fiber of my state. Native American girls and women should be able to live their lives in safety, without the fear of

being subjected to this despicable and very dark crime of human trafficking. We owe that to them.

Again, Mr. Chairman, I am very grateful that the committee is holding today's hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you may have. Thank you.