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EDITOR'S PICK TOPICAL ALERT

## 'We have to do something': Blackfeet council passes resolution to bolster tribal law enforcement

NORA MABIE

Jun 8, 2022



The entrance to the Blackfeet Reservation is pictured in this photo.

The Associated Press

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**F**or Blackfeet Councilwoman Vera Weaselhead, the problem is personal.

Her 19-year-old granddaughter, Malea Day Chief, suffered from a rare blood disorder and made two distress calls to an ambulance in April. Though Malea lived less than five minutes from the Blackfeet Community Hospital, Weaselhead said it took the ambulance 55 minutes to reach her apartment in Browning.

By the time help arrived, Weaselhead said “it was too late.”

“My baby died,” she said.

Weaselhead still doesn’t know why the ambulance was delayed, and she’s not alone in her frustration. Because Blackfeet Law Enforcement Services are under-resourced and understaffed, many people experience long wait times when calling for help.

Council Secretary Mark Pollock said about 18 tribal police officers patrol the reservation, which spans 1.5 million acres. But because officers must take time off between shifts, Pollock said sometimes two officers may be responsible for patrolling the entire reservation, which is home to more than 10,000 residents and larger than Delaware.

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“It’s dangerous,” he said, adding that it can take an officer anywhere from 45 minutes to one day to respond to a call.

Weaselhead said that too often, when help does arrive, “the incident is over, the culprit is gone, and the victim doesn’t have a chance at justice.”

The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council on Monday passed a resolution that aims to bolster tribal law enforcement. Per the resolution, the tribe has hired a consulting group that will implement an emergency response team and recruit and train community members to serve as public-safety officers.

Weaselhead, whose council seat is up for election this month, said she fears some may interpret the resolution as insulting to tribal police. She stressed that the initiative only aims to help tribal law enforcement and the public.

“We have to do something,” she said. “We lack so many services because we just don’t have the manpower to accommodate the distress calls. I don’t want another person going through what I went through with Malea.”

Pollock said he hopes the additional safety officers will help combat the opioid and missing and murdered Indigenous people crises. The tribe declared a state of emergency for fentanyl drug overdoses in March, citing 17 overdoses and four drug-related deaths among community members in one week. And while Native Americans comprise about 6.7% of Montana’s population of one million, they account for, on average, 26% of the state’s missing persons population.

“This will be a really positive thing for our community,” Pollock said.

**Eagle Child Consulting and Enforcement Services**, a native-owned business specializing in disaster and emergency services, aims to create two 50-member emergency response teams and recruit 20 to 60 public-safety officers on the Blackfeet Reservation.

The emergency response teams will be trained to do search and rescue efforts, combat natural disasters and provide security and first aid on an as-needed basis.

The safety officers will work day-to-day with the public and will be trained to respond to emergencies. Safety officers will be staffed in various communities, including Browning, East Glacier, Seville, Babb, Heart Butte and Blackfoot.

Both groups will be trained in de-escalation, and members will not be armed with lethal weapons.

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Young Bill Running Fisher, the owner of Eagle Child Consulting and Enforcement Services.

Photo courtesy of Young Bill Running Fisher

Young Bill Running Fisher, who is Aaniiih and the owner of Eagle Child Consulting and Enforcement Services, said the response teams and public-safety officers will alleviate some stress on tribal police officers, allowing them to prioritize high-threat calls.

The consulting group will offer 120 hours of training for the response team and safety officers, followed by four months of on-the-job training. Running Fisher said the group will also conduct a number of free community courses, including one June 18 where attendees can learn aggressive self-defense strategies. The terms of the tribe's contract with Eagle Child Consulting and Enforcement Services remain under negotiation.

Those interested in learning more about the emergency response team can attend an organizational meeting at 2 p.m. June 18 at Napi Elementary School, 124 1st Ave. SE in Browning. For more information, contact Mark Pollock at 406-338-7531.

To register for the free missing and murdered Indigenous people self-defense class June 18, email Gloria Running Fisher at **eaglechildconsulting@gmail.com**. Women's self-defense training will be from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and men's training will be from 3-7 p.m. Both trainings will take place at Napi Elementary School, 124 1st Ave. SE in Browning. For more information, call Rhonda Connolly at 406-450-8356.