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BUILDING A COALITION FOR LEGISLATIVE SUCCESS

Forming a strong coalition is key to powering a successful advocacy campaign to create an Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls. The coalition should bring together persons directly impacted by the crisis, the agencies responsible for taking action, experts and service providers from the community, and researchers.

Minnesota successfully established an Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls in 2023 as a result of a multiyear effort by a diverse coalition. Based on their success we offer the following tips:

1. BUILD A STRONG COALITION

A coalition may include diverse voices representing the following entities:

Survivors and Affected Families may include women and girls who have experienced violence, abduction and/or trafficking, and family members who have lost a loved one to violence. For example, in Minnesota, Lakeisha Lee, a community leader whose sister Brittany Clardy was murdered in 2013, co-chaired the Minnesota Missing and Murdered African American Women Taskforce and several survivors of trafficking testified in support of legislation to establish the state office in 2023.

Service Providers may include community organizations providing support and social services to survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and sexual exploitations; organizations providing support services such as legal, housing, health and other supports; and organizations serving women and youth more broadly. This may include shelters, violence interrupter programs, victim support services, and organizations promoting positive youth development and relationships. They may also include organizations providing social services and community-building efforts in majority-Black neighborhoods or specific to Black communities.

Advocacy Groups may include those focused on reducing violence against women or violence more broadly, improving women's rights, and/or empowering Black communities. Existing coalitions, such as state coalitions to end sexual assault, may provide opportunities to engage multiple organizations at once using established relationships.

Law Enforcement and First Responders may include local and state law enforcement and other first responders charged with responding to runaways and crimes related to violence and trafficking. This may include police, sheriff's offices, state or local public safety agencies, probation and parole officials, medical examiners and emergency medical and 911 officials. It may also include trade associations representing specific groups of law enforcement, such as an association for Black law enforcement officials or an association of local police chiefs.

Legislative Champions are imperative to the successful introduction and passage of bills to establish state offices. Consider cultivating champions from legislators who have established voting records in support of bills related to violence prevention, women's health, and/or empowerment of Black women; legislators representing districts with cases of missing and murdered Black women; legislators representing districts with large populations of Black voters; and legislators with success in enacting law enforcement reforms and building productive partnerships with law enforcement officials.

Court Officials may include state's attorney or district attorney offices, attorneys with experience in cases related to homicide, violent crimes, and/or trafficking, judges and staff from juvenile and family courts, and court officials providing victim support services.

Health Officials may provide insights into existing programs and gaps related to preventing violence from a public health perspective and financing mechanisms for health services for survivors.

Researchers can provide data on the scale and scope of the problem and summarize evidence on how to reduce violence and conduct research specific to your community, such as key informant interviews or analysis of state law enforcement data.

2. CONSIDER A TASKFORCE

If the political environment is not yet open to the creation of a state-level office, consider a legislative strategy that first establishes a taskforce and then forms the state office. In Minnesota, 2021 legislation established the Missing and Murdered African American Women Taskforce that was charged with advising the Department of Public Safety and creating a report and recommendations to the state legislature. The key recommendation from [this report](#) was to create a state-level Office of Missing and Murdered Black Women and Girls, which was then established via legislation in 2023.

The taskforce was co-chaired by Lakeisha Lee, and Dr. Deborah Mitchell, director of a local community organization focused on wealth building in Black communities. Taskforce members included state legislators; representatives from the departments of Health and Public Safety, the federal U.S. Attorney's Office of Minnesota, the county prosecutors' association, local sheriffs, and the state Coalition Against Sexual Assault; as well as community service providers. The task force was guided by an advisory board of survivors and affected family members, and research activities were supported by local researchers with experience in conducting community-engaged research.

The [report created by the taskforce](#) outlines key data points and summarizes research conducted by the taskforce—including community listening sessions, literature reviews, and analysis of state data related to missing and murdered Black women. Based on this research, the report offers key recommendations to the state, including the creation of a state-level office. This recommendation led to a bill in the following legislative session that established the state office.

This taskforce not only built the case for establishing the state office but also served as a key opportunity to educate the systems that were currently failing Black women and girls. Including the leadership of these systems as part of the taskforce ensured their engagement with the needs of those with lived experience, and resulted in recommendations that were actionable and realistic for state offices to achieve.

3. BUILD ON COALITION MEMBERS' STRENGTHS AND SKILLS

Consider coalition members' strengths and skills when developing roles. For example, survivors and family members can offer powerful stories and experiences that can convey the importance of this legislative agenda in testimony and communications campaigns. They can also offer leadership and real-life experience around which policy activities should be centered. Executives from state offices may bring detailed understanding of governance activities and procedures to ensure that policies and recommendations align with government practice. Community service providers can offer their understanding of the scope of the problem and gaps in services at a community level. They can also be trusted brokers through which to engage survivors and families.

4. CREATE A CULTURE OF HEALING AND CARE

Reforming systems to address the crisis of missing and murdered Black women will involve bringing together groups that may have historically been in opposition, naming and repairing historical and current harms, and creating openness to change. It is important to create practices to encourage open communication and respect among coalition members. This includes clearly establishing common goals and joint commitment to the cause and creating structures to encourage respectful and meaningful dialogue. Consider employing individuals with skills and training in group facilitation and healing and mindfulness methods to help formalize these practices in coalition meetings.

Engaging survivors and their families is critical but must be done with care. Some survivors and families may feel comfortable participating and leading groups including a broad range of organizations and being public in their participation. Others may want to contribute through different mechanisms such as providing feedback on policies and sharing experiences anonymously through listening sessions and other approaches. Partnering with organizations who have established trusted relationships can allow for more effective engagement with survivors and their families.