

## **Statement of Ranking Member Filemon Vela**

### **Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security Hearing**

#### **“Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Federal Efforts to Stop Human Trafficking”**

**September 26, 2018**

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Human trafficking is one of the most profitable forms of transnational crime. The International Labour Organization estimates that forced labor generates annual profits of \$150 billion per year and claims more than 20 million victims worldwide.

Trafficking victims can be of any age, race, gender, or nationality and are largely found in workplaces within the manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality, and domestic service industries.

The federal government has a significant role to play in building capacity, resources, and synchronization among communities, local government, and international partners.

However, one area that I believe we are overlooking are tribal lands. Last year, the Government Accountability Office issued two related reports about the number of investigated and prosecuted human trafficking cases that involved American Indians and Alaska Natives victims and that occurred on tribal lands. The findings left me puzzled.

The Departments of Justice, Interior, and Homeland Security each have some form of responsibility for investigating and prosecuting human trafficking crimes on tribal lands. Forty-nine of the 94 U.S. Attorney’s Offices include Indian country within their jurisdiction. However, three out of four of these federal entities do not require their agents or attorneys to consistently collect or record the race or ethnicity, including Native American status, of victims in their cases.

As a result, the total number of federal human trafficking investigations and prosecutions that involved Native American victims is unknown. We also don’t know how many Native American victims received services under federal grant programs intended to assist human trafficking victims for much the same reason – grantees are not required to capture this information.

This seems like a major gap and makes it difficult for us to understand the full scope of the problem.

Despite our best efforts to encourage more interagency coordination, improve law enforcement training and resources for victims, and push out more awareness campaigns, we won’t know how effective or helpful they may be if we don’t fully understand the full scope of people affected by human trafficking or why they may be vulnerable.

For this reason, I thank Judge Michelle Demmert for accepting my invitation to testify today. She serves as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for the Tlingit and Haida Tribes of Alaska, and she also serves as the Co-Chair of the National Congress of American Indians Task Force on Violence Against Women.

I found the statistics you shared in your written testimony sobering, and I am pleased that the Committee will get the benefit of your views on this issue given your long experience fight on behalf of American

Indian and Alaska Native women and children who have been subjected to this and other forms of violence. I would like to hear from you on what more needs to be done by federal agencies to improve services to victims and to help bring traffickers to justice.

As the Ranking Member of this subcommittee, I was glad to cosponsor and support passage of the Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign Authorization Act of 2017 late last year. The Blue Campaign brings DHS components together with federal, state, local law enforcement agencies, private industry to dismantle human trafficking networks across the country.

I would like to hear from our DHS and DOJ witnesses today about how this and other federal efforts underway assist tribal law enforcement in addressing human trafficking on their lands. Federal programs and coordination are crucial in this fight, but there is clearly a lot of work left to do to ensure that vulnerable people across the country and around the globe are protected.

We also should be mindful of policies put in place by the Administration that may end up increasing the likelihood of human trafficking and undermining our best efforts. I would note persistent reports of "metering" or the practice of wait listing people seeking asylum who were turned away at land ports of entry due to capacity issues.

By these accounts, people would rather risk spending several nights in a row on these bridges than to lose their opportunity to claim asylum. This leaves them incredibly vulnerable to traffickers who are more than willing to exploit them.

DHS must be sure they are not creating a whole new set of problems because the Administration wishes to carry out an inhumane policy that can deliberately interfere with people's right to claim asylum.

My hope is that we all walk away today with a more meaningful understanding of how else we need to partner to end human trafficking and incorporate it into the national conversation.