



The **Opportunity** Agenda

Building the National Will to Expand Opportunity in America

The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center's Campaign for Justice for Victims of Rape and Sexual Assault

American Indian and Alaska Native women are battered, raped and stalked at far greater rates than any other group of women in the U.S. The statistics are shocking: one in three is raped in her lifetime. Most of the assailants in these crimes are not American Indians or Alaska Natives and many are repeat offenders. Although the U.S. government has both the jurisdiction and the obligation to prosecute crimes on reservations, prosecutions are rare and convictions rarer. A major cause of this failure to investigate and prosecute is the absence of standardized sexual assault policies and protocols within the Indian Health Services (IHS). This means that the physical evidence necessary for a successful prosecution is not collected, and victims are not given the support and after-care services provided to non-Native sexual assault victims throughout the U.S.

Over the course of five years, from 2003 to 2008, this issue went from being unknown to all but the victims and their families to being the subject of federal legislation. The issue's movement from obscurity to the federal policy agenda happened in large part because of the efforts of the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center (NAWHERC) and other Native women advocates, and communications played an important role. Their communications strategy combined four components:

1. Raising awareness within the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the principal advocacy organization for American Indian and Alaska Native rights;
2. Partnering with a human rights organization with the resources to investigate, issue a report, and generate media coverage;
3. Positioning themselves as the go-to experts on the issue;
4. Engaging in media advocacy.

To activate member tribes of the NCAI to fight for the adoption of new guidelines for the treatment of survivors of sexual assault NAWHERC secured funding and wrote and directed a hard-hitting nine-minute video, "Violence Against Women is Against the Law," which was screened at the NCAI's 63rd Annual Convention in Sacramento in 2006. NAWHERC's work came to the attention of Amnesty International USA which conducted a formal investigation and released a 112-page report, "Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA," at a full-court press conference in April 2007. The release of the report generated media coverage and speaking opportunities for Native women advocates, including an investigative series on NPR's All Things Considered, in-depth stories in The New York Times and the Washington Post, and a long feature in Glamour Magazine. The story became too big to ignore, and included in the Omnibus Appropriations Act of 2009, signed by President Obama on March 11th, was a \$7,500,000 appropriation to address the problem of sexual violence against Indian and Alaskan women, including the development of standardized sexual assault policies and procedures.