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Michigan receives grant to enhance legal services for victims living in rural and tribal communities

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LANSING, Mich. – Michigan will develop a roadmap to ensure victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking have enhanced access to civil legal assistance in Michigan's rural and tribal communities thanks to a federal grant awarded to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Division of Victim Services.

Limited financial resources, geographic isolation, and diverse cultural barriers currently inhibit many tribal and rural victims from accessing essential legal services and representation.

“Providing affordable, equitable, and accessible civil legal representation to all victims of crime is essential, and this project seeks to enhance these efforts for those living in rural and tribal communities,” said Debi Cain, executive director of the MDHHS Division of Victim Services. “This multi-coalition partnership shows how important these efforts are to countless victims and their families, and we are grateful for this opportunity to work together on their behalf.”

For several years the Division of Victim Services has provided funding for numerous legal initiatives that have identified significant gaps in services for tribal and rural victims. This project seeks to evaluate existing efforts to support these communities while creating a comprehensive roadmap for future work to enhance the availability of meaningful legal assistance. The division has partnered with Michigan’s tribal coalition, Uniting Three Fires Against Violence and the Michigan Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence on this project.

“As someone who has worked for over 20 years representing rural victims of violence, I can personally attest to the deep lack of available resources for victims of crime,” said Sarah Prout Rennie, J.D., executive director of the Michigan Coalition to End Domestic and Sexual Violence. “I am proud to be part of this effort and am grateful to Debi Cain and the Division of Victim Services for being such trailblazers in the ongoing work to ensure victims of crime have the support they need.”

JoAnne Cook, J.D., will serve as the statewide victim liaison responsible for convening stakeholders in tribal communities and in specific rural communities to identify the needs, challenges, and solutions to providing legal assistance to survivors of domestic and sexual violence, stalking, and related crimes. Cook, a member of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, has extensive experience on criminal justice and tribal issues, including service as a tribal court judge and tribal council member.

“There is a great need for civil legal service that considers the complexities of access to safety and justice within tribal communities,” said Rachel Carr, executive director of Uniting Three Fires Against Violence. “We’re excited to be a part of this collaborative project and are hopeful that in the future, those seeking civil legal service will not experience the barriers that our tribal and rural communities have faced for so long.”

To learn more about programs and services offered by the Michigan Division of Victim Services, visit www.Michigan.gov/CrimeVictim.

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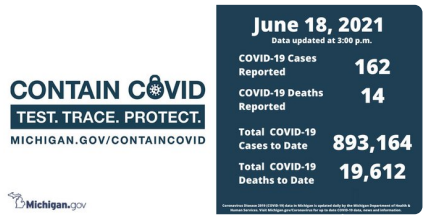

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