

STATEMENT TO BE RELEASED TO PUBLIC

Statement on the Death of Abbey Lynn Steele By Tribal & Community Organizations and Concerned Individuals

On Friday, December 2, 2022, 20-year-old Abbey Lynn Steele of Rapid City, South Dakota died at Monument Hospital after arriving unconscious and not breathing from the Pennington County Jail on November 16th. The Native community of Rapid City is grief-stricken and outraged by Abbey's untimely death and the circumstances surrounding it. Abbey had given birth via emergency surgery on November 11th, merely five days before her violent arrest, detention, and hospitalization. Her death under the watch and authority of major institutions in Rapid City is an affront to common decency and basic human dignity. Abbey Steele should be alive today. Two children are now without their mother and have lost the opportunity to know her. Our community demands justice for Abbey and her family.

Abbey was arrested, on an outstanding warrant, by a Rapid City Police Department officer who had arrested her 3 times previously. Video footage shows this police officer chasing and forcing a distraught Abbey into handcuffs while she was postpartum, post-surgery, and highly medically vulnerable. The jail and police would not respond to Abbey Lynn Steele's mother's questions as to her whereabouts and did not disclose her being admitted to the hospital or that she was not only unconscious, but not breathing. Abbey's mother, Amy Steele, next called the hospital directly, in a desperate attempt to find her daughter. The hospital disclosed that Abbey was a patient in their care and on a ventilator.

The ongoing violation of human, treaty, civil, and statutory rights of the Oceti Sakowin and other Indigenous Peoples in this city and in this state, has resulted in the death of a 20 year old woman, Abbey Lynn Steele. We are demanding an immediate response around the failures of the justice and medical systems here in Rapid City that are implicated in Abbey's demise. These system failures are rooted in racial animus, white supremacy, and a pattern of practices aimed against Native Americans living in Pennington County, South Dakota. Right now, the family is unable to bury their daughter, sister, and mother as her body has not been released by the authorities.

The inconsistency in information is highly suspect. Given the historical mistreatment, discrimination, and grossly negligent behavior towards Indigenous Peoples by Pennington County, we have no reason to trust any narrative coming from institutions that continue to violate our people. We have reasons to believe that the administrators of the Pennington County Jail and adjacent agencies are likely to coordinate manipulation of the public to shift blame and escape accountability; Abbey Lynn Steele died while in their care and custody.

Indigenous Peoples, especially our women, do not enter into these situations or systems alone; they will always have relatives standing with them and behind them. We collectively demand, in support of the Steele family:

- Immediate release of Abbey back to her family. There are constitutionally protected Lakota religious and spiritual beliefs that must be respected.
- An independent investigation and autopsy by expert parties outside of South Dakota must be funded.
- Release of video and detail to the family regarding Abbey's detention. They have a right to know what took place in her final hours of consciousness.
- Develop a protocol for notifying family members and support systems when loved ones are transferred from the jail to the hospital. We now have multiple accounts of community members being transferred unconscious, from the jail to the hospital, because of injuries sustained within the jail without any notification to their families. Community members who are unable to contact their support systems during such a time should not be alone; their loved ones should not be in the dark regarding their location and health status.
- Expunge or provide amnesty for non-violent warrants and re-direct warrant processes towards safer practices. Warrants create a dangerous situation for vulnerable people because of the tremendous violence that takes place at the time of arrest. Cities like Denver have deployed healthcare professionals for certain populations and situations, instead of law enforcement. Protocols like this would have preserved Abbey's life.
- Develop specific protocol about how law enforcement and correction officers engage with those who may be pregnant, post-partum, and otherwise medically vulnerable. Announce this protocol publicly and provide regular public reports on how it was followed.
- Require attendance of all Pennington County law enforcement, hospital and jail staff at training on de-escalation and implicit bias.

The public is encouraged to come forward if they have similar stories.

Signed,

Organizations:

Wotakuye Mutual Aid aka Meals for Relatives COVID-19 Community Response

He Sapa Birth Circle

He Sapa Voters Initiative

COUP Council

International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee

Oyatekin Chante Wastepi

Native Lives Matter

Missing Indigenous Sisters Tools Initiative (MISTI)

Mothers Against Meth Alliance (MAMA)

Rise in Love Foundation

Florida Rising

Wičounčage Woasniya

Oyuhpe Tokala

Justice Empowerment Network (JEN)

Wowapi Luta
Lakota Visions Jewelry Inc.
International Indigenous Youth Council - Oglala Lakota chapter
People of the Confluence
Women with Bows
Two Spirit Nation
West River Tenants United
Wiconi Waste Resistance Farm

Individuals:

Rakefet Leah Gruetze, Rapid City, SD
Lilias Jarding, Rapid City, SD
Michaela Madrid, Spearfish, SD
Cynthia Robertson, Rapid City, SD
Monica Apple, Oglala Lakota/Yankton, Rapid City, SD
Sharon McCoy, Dixie, WA
Valeria Primeaux, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Julia Fike, Sisseton, SD
Lori Afraid of Lightning, Rapid City, SD
Laura Walsh, Fairview, MI
Roxie Bolnick, North Carolina
Lyndsay Dudd, Battle Creek, MI
Sarah Stout, Hill City, SD
Sarah Amiotte, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Raine Little, Oglala Lakota, Oglala, SD
Trey Fields, Oglala Lakota, Jacksonville, FL
Julie Richards, Oglala Lakota, Pine Ridge, SD
Vandee Crane, Tesuque, NM
Glenebah Tulley, Navajo, Sioux Falls, SD
Raina Loafer, Rosebud Sioux, Rapid City, SD
Joyce Wheeler, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Hermis Earle Tail, Oyupe Oglala, Manderson, SD
Thony Medicine Eagle-Schweigman, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Ramona Herrington, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Lisa Ricci, Minneapolis, MN
Teresa Estes, Kul Wicasa Lower Brule, SD
Dawn Young, Sicangu Lakota, Rosebud, SD
Kehala Diserly, Spirit Lake Dakota, Rapid City, SD
Natalie Stites Means, Cheyenne River Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Cheryl Angel, Sovereign Sisters, Sacred Activism, Rapid City, SD
Jean Roach, Rapid City, SD
Pandora Traversie, Cheyenne River Lakota, Pipestone, MN
Monica R Deschon, Fort Peck, MT
Miskooquwezance Means, Rapid City, SD
Kathryn McKibben, Dine/Quapaw, Reno NV
Taylor Casey Wade, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD

Hermus Bettelyoun, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Anne Reddy, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Carly Black Bull, Oglala Lakota
Kimberlynn Floren, Sioux Falls, SD
Gloria Eastman, Sicangu Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Mitchell Zephier, Lower Brule, Rapid City, SD
Jacquelynn White Hat, Sicangu, Rapid City, SD
Hollis Neck, Rapid City, SD
Deborah Jihon, Pueblo Isleta, NM
Eleanor Ferguson, Oglala Lakota, Kyle, SD
Lona Knight, Dupree, SD
Elijah Steele, MHA, Rapid City, SD
Cassandra Little Owl, Crow, Crow Agency, MT
Iliana Wood, Sicangu, Rosebud, SD
Arlene Hopkins, Oglala Lakota
Anna Montes, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Theresa Lange, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City SD
Stardust Red Bow, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City SD
Lori Laiwa Thomas, Pomo, Hopland, CA
Allison Renville, Dakotas For America, Sisseton, SD
Zintkala Mahpiya Win Blackowl, sicangu lakota Brave Heart Dakota Womens Warrior
Society, Oceti Sakowin Treaty Territory
Karissa Loewen, Rapid City, SD
Shannon Emry, MD
Erica Moore, UCTP, Awarwakan Taino, Brookings, SD
Mary Haan, Rapid City, SD
Angel Flying Hawk, Oglala Lakota, Rapid City, SD
Tria Blue Wakpa, Los Angeles, CA
Linda Kramer, Borderlands Education and Spiritual Center, Hill City, SD
Jessica Hubner, Rapid City, SD
Carla Jones, Sicangu Lakota, Greenfield, WI
Heather Wood, Oglala Lakota citizen, Mniluzahan Otunwahe - Rapid City, SD
Jaminn Andreas Hubner, Rapid City, SD
Danae Mckee, Suttons Bay, MI
Mashugashon Camp, Ponca/Lakota/hopi, New Town, SD
Walaa Alqaisiya, Columbia University, Rapid City, SD
Michelle Tyon, Oglala Lakota, Wiconi Waste Resistance Farm, Porcupine, SD
Renee M Chacon, Wmxn from the mountain, Denver, CO