



SUNDAY EDITION

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Chris Flynn / The Forum

Linda Anderson is the mother of Melissa Eagleshield, who went missing more than five years ago. Anderson said she's certain her daughter is no longer alive. Now, she just wants answers.

'Workforce is our No. 1 issue'

Fargo, West Fargo pledge \$800K toward \$5M 'Fueling Our Future' workforce drive

By Patrick Springer
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FARGO — Bernie Dardis remembers a time when his sign company was looking to hire a lead graphic artist and got 63 applications from four states.

That was back in the 1990s, when the Fargo-Moorhead job market was much less competitive than it is today. Now, he said, a similar job posting is likely to draw just one or two applicants.

Dardis, now the mayor of West Fargo, is an enthusiastic backer of a \$5 million initiative called Fueling Our Future, a partnership between The Fargo Moorhead West Fargo Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Fargo Moorhead Economic Development Corp.

The effort, announced in May, is backed by the cities of Fargo and West Fargo, which each have committed \$400,000 in public money.

"It would have a very positive effect on the entire region," he said. "It felt right to myself and my fellow commissioners."

Fargo Mayor Tim Mahoney said the metro area continually struggles to fill jobs.

"Workforce is our No. 1 issue," he said. "It keeps coming up. We need to hire people in this community. We need to attack it more aggressively."

Thirty-four private employers have pledged another \$3.3 million, with total commitments of \$4.1 million toward the \$5 million goal.

Recently, Fargo topped a list compiled by ZipRecruiter of the "hottest job markets" in 2020 in a ranking citing the metro area's rapid job growth rate — job postings increase at a rate of 55% per year — and favorable ratio of job openings to candidates.

But with a 2.6% unemployment rate, employers continue to struggle to fill positions.

"We've come to the conclusion that we've got to do this on our own," Dardis said. "Somebody else isn't going to do this for us."

The centerpiece of Fueling Our Future is the proposed \$30 million Cass County career workforce academy, a partnership coordinated by the North Dakota State College of Science that includes four public school districts: Fargo, West Fargo, Central Cass and Northern Cass.

Separately, the Moorhead Area Public Schools district is pursuing its own career academy, a public-private concept uniting K-12, technical education and employers that has found wide acceptance all over the country.

One common misconception is that Fargo-Moorhead pay levels aren't competitive, with surveys showing an average \$26.64 hourly wage, said Carey Fry, manager of Job Service North Dakota's Fargo Workforce Center.

Almost a third of job openings paid more than \$30 per hour, while more than 30% pay \$15 to \$19.99 per hour, according to Job Service figures. Only 0.3% pay \$10 to \$14.99 per hour.

WORKFORCE: Page A7

'JOURNEY OF NO ANSWERS'

Melissa Eagleshield went missing 5 years ago.

Thousands more Indigenous people have vanished since.

By Natasha Rausch, Sarah Mearhoff and Dana Ferguson
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Editor's note: This is the first installment of a three-part series on the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the upper Plains.

Becker County, Minn.

It's been five years since Linda Anderson last saw her daughter. And she hasn't stopped looking since.

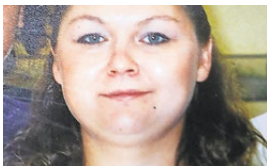
Her daughter, Melissa Eagleshield, then 42, vanished in the middle of an autumn night.

Her socks, shoes, purse, left behind at a house in the middle of the woods. It was dark and only a few degrees above freezing when she was last seen at the house.

Investigators think perhaps Eagleshield wandered off in the middle of the night, losing her way in the unforgiving wilderness of Becker County.

Her mom thinks something more foul happened.

No one knows for sure, as Eagleshield has yet to be found. But her mom is certain about one thing: Her daughter isn't alive. She would have called one of her kids or grandkids, or used the money left in her bank account by now, Anderson said. At this point, Anderson



Submitted photo

Melissa Eagleshield, a descendant of White Earth Nation, was 42 years old when she went missing on Oct. 5, 2014. She was last seen at a house in the woods of Becker County, Minnesota.

is just hoping for "closure."

"It's just a long, hard journey of no answers," she said. "You're always looking, but there's no answers."

Eagleshield, a descendant of the White Earth Nation in Minnesota, is one of the thousands of Indigenous people who have gone missing in the 21st century. The precise number of missing Indigenous people, however, is still unknown because of inadequate data collection, according to Tom Rodgers, acting president of the Global Indigenous Council.

Annita Lucchesi, a Cheyenne woman,

HOW TO GET HELP

If you or someone you know is a victim of violence, please consider calling the National Indian Women Resource Center at 406-477-3896 or the StrongHearts Native Helpline at 1-844-762-8483. In an emergency situation, please call 911.

is working to determine that number.

With no initial funding or institutional support, she founded the Sovereign Bodies Institute in 2019, with the goal of documenting every case of a missing or murdered Indigenous person in North America. In February 2019, she told South Dakota legislators that she alone had documented over 4,000 cases in the United States and Canada — 158 from South Dakota, and 35 from North Dakota since 1900.

"This violence is happening on a truly tremendous proportion," she said.

'It's very deep-rooted'

Historian and South Dakota state Sen. Tamara St. John, a Republican from the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribe, said last year that cases of Indigenous women gone missing and forgotten "go on and on," fueled by the long-term historical trauma of colonialism,

MISSING: Page A6

Bloomberg funneling funds into campaign, even in ND



MIKE MCFEELY
The Forum

Being a Democrat in North Dakota is generally a depressing venture, given the rightward slide of the state and its love for all things Trump. But things are looking up.

Not on the political

front. North Dakota will remain as red as Rudolph's nose for the foreseeable future.

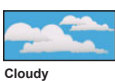
If you're a politico, though, and you're looking to make some cash, Michael Bloomberg

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(Suggested retail price)
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Today's weather



Cloudy

28°
16°
Details, D6

Classifieds F.G
Comics Z
Obituaries A4, C2-3, C6-8
Opinion C4-5
Sports D
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Melissa Eagleshield was last seen at a house on Jager Road in Becker County, Minnesota. Law enforcement has conducted numerous searches through the nearby forest since she went missing in October 2014. Independent sleuth Lissa Yellow Bird-Chase said Eagleshield has to be somewhere in the woods.

MISSING

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stereotyping and dehumanization. She told fellow legislators the story of Lakota Rae Renville, a shy girl from her tribe who police assumed was a prostitute after she was murdered at 22 years old in 2005.

"When Native women are portrayed in such a way, I think that adds to that perception, or even to depersonalize individuals and not see us as mothers or maybe a young working woman," she told reporters.

The crisis has also been linked to natural resource mining on reservations, jurisdictional disputes between local, state, tribal and federal authorities, a convoluted justice system that doesn't always hold non-Native perpetrators accountable, insufficient law enforcement in often remote Indian Country, and longstanding struggles with poverty on reservations.

The crisis goes by many names, such as missing and murdered Indigenous women, women and girls, people, or even relatives. And the problem dates back to European colonists. The earliest well-known case is that of Pocahontas, a member of the Powhatan Tribe, who was taken by English settlers in the early 17th Century.

The widespread examples go on.

In the upper Plains alone, hundreds of Dakota women and children died after being exiled from Minnesota to Crow Creek, South Dakota, in 1862. Less than 30 years later, hundreds of Lakota men, women and children were slaughtered by U.S. troops in the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, for which U.S. soldiers received Medals of Honor.

During the boarding school era from 1869 to the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their homes and put into schools where they suffered physical and sexual abuse. As recently as the 1950s and 1960s, Native women have alleged abuse at Catholic boarding schools in Marty, South Dakota.

"It's very deep-rooted," said North Dakota state Rep. Ruth Buffalo, D-Fargo. "Until uncomfortable conversations and addressing the atrocities that Indigenous people

have faced over time, what we're seeing today is a symptom."

By 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice estimated more than half of Indigenous women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetimes, and they're 1.7 times more likely than white women to have experienced violence in the past year. Also in 2016, the National Crime Information Center logged almost 6,000 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous people in the U.S. But that figure is low, according to the Global Indigenous Council, as many cases go unreported, or a person's tribal affiliation goes unrecorded.

Local and state efforts in the region have cropped up in an effort to better understand and address the crisis. In Minnesota, a state task force was created to probe the issue and find state-level solutions. And North and South Dakota have passed legislation calling for increased data collection and law enforcement training on the issue.

But advocates say that's not enough. And at the federal level, Congress has failed to pass reforms that could forge meaningful change.

Cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women continue to be reported in the region and beyond. Meanwhile, as more go missing, family members, friends and others have continued searching, picking up where law enforcement left off or opted not to pursue investigations.

Still out there

Melissa Eagleshield was last seen near Island Lake in Becker County, Minnesota — outside the boundaries of the White Earth Reservation.

Her case fell to the Becker County Sheriff's Office. Todd Glander was the sergeant on duty the night Eagleshield's cousin called 911 to report a missing person. Glander is now the county sheriff.

The call came in at 7:20 p.m. on Oct. 5, 2014, at least 14 hours after Eagleshield was last seen, police records show. Officers quickly determined Eagleshield had last been seen at a house on Jager Road, south of County Road 126 near Island Lake. Dan Jager, who lived at the house, told police he last saw her at 5 a.m. Assuming she found a



Chris Flynn / The Forum

Fifty-six-year-old Pauline Keezer, a White Earth member, is the aunt of Melissa Eagleshield. "It's hard at night when I go to bed thinking of her," Keezer said. "I pray for her every night. I miss her, not seeing her. It's taken a toll on all of us."

ride or went to meet somebody, he didn't report her missing right away.

Around 10 p.m. that night, searchers descended on the area. Becker County Sheriff's Office and Detroit Lakes Fire Department showed up; Hubbard County brought a search dog and two snowmobiles; Sanford AirMed sent a helicopter. The Frazee and Wolf Lake fire departments also joined the effort. The next day, even more help arrived, from the White Earth Police Department and state patrol.

Once the search began, "I don't believe we quit looking," Glander said. "This search started, and once it started, essentially it hasn't ended."

Every fall, spring and summer, the search continues. Though it's been more than five years since she went missing, Glander still remembers the cool weather on the first night of the search, and he wonders whether she was dressed for the elements, having seen many cases of hypothermia.

Jager Road is a dead end leading to the woods — a vast expanse of trees, hills, low ground, swamps, ponds and lakes. It's beautiful, but it's easy to get lost. Or not be found. Eagleshield's mom, cousins and aunts have been out searching, too, though not going too deep into the woods.

According to her mom, Eagleshield was a spunky person. When she was growing up, she was



Chris Flynn / The Forum

Becker County Sheriff Todd Glander was the sergeant on duty the night Melissa Eagleshield was reported missing. "I don't think there's many days that go by that I don't think about it," Glander said. "I've met with her mother, her aunt, relatives. I see the pain that they're going through of just not knowing."



I don't believe we quit looking. This search started, and once it started, essentially it hasn't ended.

TODD GLANDER

mechanically inclined, too, once taking the bolts out of all the doors in the apartment just for fun.

Her aunt, 56-year-old Pauline Keezer, said Eagleshield was funny, that most people remember her sense of humor. She was outgoing, too. Keezer remembers babysitting her when she was young and then frequently running into her in Detroit Lakes when she'd grown up.

"I pray for her every night," Keezer said. "It's not knowing. That's the hardest part. Not knowing what happened, where she's at, who could do such terrible things."

Anderson said Eagleshield started drinking alcohol as a

teenager and eventually became addicted. She had her first daughter when she was 15. As an adult, Eagleshield was frequently homeless and "part of a bad crowd," her mom said.

But Anderson said the community should be safe for everyone. "It isn't about whether you're an addict, or you're homeless, or whatever. You're still a valuable person."

Lissa Yellow Bird-Chase, who's dedicated her life to searching for missing people, has helped search for Eagleshield. "Missy's out there," she said. "She's out in that forest. I just know it."

Because the case is still open, Glander said there aren't any conclusions

yet on what happened to her. "We're not ruling anything out right now," he said, but "at this point, we have nothing to indicate that foul play was involved."

Anderson thinks differently.

"It was dark. It was cold," she said. "You don't walk away barefoot. I think something happened."

But with her daughter still missing, Anderson said she doesn't know for sure.

After all these years, she just wants answers. And for that, she said, "You always have to have hope."

Readers can reach reporters Natasha Rausch, Sarah Mearhoff and Dana Ferguson at mmlw@forumcomm.com or call toll-free at 1-877-583-1817.