

NINA MOINI: The Minneapolis Police Department made mistakes in two high-profile cases, and the city auditor is recommending steps the department needs to make. The auditor's report comes after the death of Alison Luscher and the shooting of Davis Moturi. Cari Spencer reports. Both of these high-profile cases were part of a wave of public outcry last year from community members, accusing MPD of failing to protect people of color.

PEARL WARREN: What it does is it tells on the negligence. It tells on what fell between the cracks, and that there is a lot of work that needs to be done.

CARI SPENCER: That was what council member Pearl Warren took away from the presentation.

PEARL WARREN: It hurts me to my core to know that we continue to lose victims. We continue to fail our neighbors in this capacity, and that cries for help fall on deaf ears, especially when it comes from individuals in Black and Brown communities.

CARI SPENCER: The audit finds that the handling of the cases was undermined by inconsistent documentation, poor communication, and missed opportunities to intervene. The report also noted that staffing shortages in the department made things worse. The report outlines dozens of recommended reforms and adds to ongoing scrutiny of how police respond to high-risk, repeat calls for help. Robert Timmerman was the auditor.

ROBERT TIMMERMAN: Reporting practices varied widely, including incomplete witness statements, missing victim forms, inconsistent injury documentation, and the inconsistent use of police report workflow flags for bias, weapons, or repeat conduct.

CARI SPENCER: The report started with the case of Davis Moturi. Moturi, who was Black, was shot by his white neighbor, John Sawchak, in 2024 after a year of reporting escalating harassment to the police. That harassment was often accompanied by racial slurs and threats. Timmerman says officers only noted that in one police report, and other incidents went unaddressed.

ROBERT TIMMERMAN: Several incidents in the summer and fall of 2024 were either not assigned to an investigator, not escalated to leadership, or forwarded to the Hennepin County Attorney's Office, or both.

CARI SPENCER: That includes an incident shortly before Maturi was shot in which Sawchak pointed a gun at him. Across both cases, the report said a major problem was a problematic breakdown in communication between the Hennepin County attorney and the police chief. Both parties have said they're committed to improving communication. The report also analyzed MPD's handling of the unsolved case of Alison Lussier, a Native American woman who was found dead in her apartment in 2024 after two years of reporting domestic abuse to the police. One of the most dramatic moments came when the auditor revealed that MPD did not obtain the medical examiner's report for its investigation until the audit team requested it.

JANA WILLIAMS: That speaks volumes of their negligence.

CARI SPENCER: That's Jana Williams, Alison Lussier's aunt. Williams said getting this report was a milestone and like moving a mountain. But she is not easing up in her push for accountability. She spoke to press after the presentation.

JANA WILLIAMS: We will continue to push for transparency, for answers, and for charges in Alison's case, because what this audit revealed today, the gaps, the failures, only reinforces what we have been saying all along.

CARI SPENCER: The full after-action review is more than 100 pages long and is available online to the public. Cari Spencer, NPR News, Minneapolis.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

A warning that this next segment discusses sexual violence. Community members and advocates from Native communities across the state and country wrapped up a three-day conference on ending sexual violence. This morning.

The Annual Restoring the Sacred Trails of Our Grandmothers Conference is hosted by the Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition. Our next guest, who heads the coalition, says this year's event comes at a particularly difficult time. Nicole Matthews joins me now. Thanks for being with us, Nicole.

NICOLE Thanks for having me.

MATTHEWS:

CARI SPENCER: I'd like to start with the theme that you chose this year, "growing our garden." And what was top of mind for you as you were planning this year's gathering?

NICOLE I think every year we work with our coalition membership and our partners to come up with a theme. And really, **MATTHEWS:** this theme was around. Even in the midst of a lot of turmoil, there's been funding cuts. There's been a lot of changes to the landscape of advocacy. We can still plant seeds. There's still seeds to plant. It might mean we have to look at, what does the landscape look like right now? What is our soil rich for? Know what the right plants are to plant. And also, how do we continue to water ourselves, our own garden so we can sustain our ourselves in the work that we do because the work of advocacy is challenging?

CARI SPENCER: Absolutely. And the Indian Law Resource Center says that more than half of Native women have experienced sexual violence. Can you talk about just some of the specific challenges here in the state of Minnesota when it comes to addressing sexual assault and violence?

NICOLE First and foremost, we don't have enough resources. And in this last year where we have seen funding cuts-- in **MATTHEWS:** fact, last year during our conference, the Department of Justice cut \$800 million in funding to programs that serve victims. So we have seen programs that now have half the staff that they had a year ago. And when you have half the staff but the current number or more cases, It? Really taps your people resources, your human resources, and also the services available and the resources in the community. And we're certainly seeing an increase in needs from the community.

CARI SPENCER: You mentioned self-care, the importance, especially with less resources of caring for oneself and in this type of work. I know this was the last day of the conference. Would you want to share just some highlight moments for you of the past few days?

NICOLE Absolutely. I was just talking with a colleague of mine about what was their favorite part. And there were so many moments that were really great. And we had a great discussion this morning about how to not only self-care because it's not really just about the individual, but it's about how our organizations creating communities of care, organizational wellness.

How are those who are in positions of leadership, caring for the people who are caring for the people? So does it live in your policies? And are we giving people adequate time off? And are we noticing when people feel burned out?

We also, over the last couple of days, had a self-care carnival. So an evening to have fun together, to find joy, to laugh. And last night, we had our annual Honoring Survivors Powwow-- so a way to connect with the community, to dance together, to honor the victims that we all serve every day, and just connecting with those the advocates across the state that we don't always get to see.

CARI SPENCER: You've been doing the conference for 19 years, I understand.

NICOLE 19 years, yeah.

MATTHEWS:

CARI SPENCER: How does it fit in with some of the larger work you're doing here in the state and both nationally with other states?

NICOLE Yeah. And it's interesting because we started as a statewide organization, a statewide tribal coalition. And we always talk about how that's really the core of our work and really centers us. Like our community organizing our work with the tribes and the communities in Minnesota really centers who we are as an organization. But because of the work that we do, we also do work nationally.

So we work to provide national training and assistance and support to tribes and tribal programs across the United States. And because of that work, we've been seeing an increase in people from outside of Minnesota coming to our statewide conference. And so this year, we had someone from North Carolina. We had someone from Alaska, Oregon, Oklahoma, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wisconsin.

So really seeing people come from across the country who are all working on addressing sexual violence in their communities, who want to connect with other service providers, who want to learn from each other. And it really adds to the richness of the event, of the conference. And we learn so much from each other when you bring people together. It's not only about the people who are there to speak at the workshops, but it's about the participants who are sharing also their wealth, the wealth of knowledge and their wisdom with everyone.

CARI SPENCER: Absolutely. Sexual violence is what you were focused on. There are domestic violence. I mean, there are so many ways that people need help. And I'm not sure if you were able to listen to our last story by reporter Cari Spencer, but I'm sure that you know of the several problems of the investigation into Alison Lussier's death. She was an Indigenous woman who was found dead in her home in 2024.

A part of the report, the audit that was released, discussed the theme of substance abuse and saying that there was this is a quote here, "a disregard for the suspicious nature of her death and a manifestation of bias against Native women and victims suffering from substance abuse." Can you tell us more about how law enforcement and other communities and other entities that are supposed to help can do better in helping people who might be dealing with different struggles, but are still facing saying domestic abuse or sexual violence?

NICOLE Yes, thank you for that. And I know this case very well. And I've worked with we've worked with Jenna since this
MATTHEWS: happened and has really--

CARI SPENCER: Alison's aunt, yeah.

NICOLE --tried to help.

MATTHEWS:

CARI SPENCER: Yes.

NICOLE And I want to also say that Jenna really pushed and continues to push to get justice for this case. And she has
MATTHEWS: done a phenomenal job. And this case really highlights some real systemic failures that we brought up during our work with the MMIW task force.

And we heard these same cases, these same stories, when we were doing our work through the task force about victims that were in a domestic violence relationship. And then upon them dying, the investigation dies because they think it was either an overdose or a suicide. And when you dig a little bit deeper, and you start to see some of the connections. You see that that's just not correct.

And there's a few things I want to say about her case. One is that regardless if a person has a substance abuse issue or uses substances, it does not give anyone an excuse to harm them. They still deserve justice. They still deserve protection. They still deserve safety. And we still need to honor them as a human being. So that's first.

There was a long history of domestic violence. That should have been the first thing the investigators looked for because we had calls. In fact, there were calls within the 48 hours prior to her death, and she was asking for help. She was doing the things that we tell victims to do to protect themselves. And the system failed her in a very big way. And it's heartbreaking that we have cases like this, and we're losing people. People are losing their lives and are receiving very little justice. And this is something we consistently hear about in Indian country and with Native victims.

CARI SPENCER: Nicole, I wish we had more time. I thank you so much for your perspective and for coming on, and I hope you'll join us again very soon to talk about your continued work. Thank you.

NICOLE I would love to. Thank you.

MATTHEWS:

CARI SPENCER: Nicole Matthews is the chief executive officer of the Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition. If you or anyone you needs immediate help, the Strong Hearts Native Helpline can be reached 24/7 at 1-844-762-8483.