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Controversy surrounds letter sent to tribal leaders after a death on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation

Ute Mountain Gun Violence Prevention Coalition demands actions from tribal leaders to prevent gun violence, but later apologizes

By Benjamin Rubin Journal Staff Writer

Friday, Aug 15, 2025 5:50 PM Updated Saturday, Aug. 16, 2025 11:58 AM



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A vehicle from the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services is parked adjacent to the Ute Mountain Casino in early July. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



After an alleged homicide Tuesday on the Ute Mountain Ute reservation shook the small community, a letter demanding action to prevent gun violence was sent by a group of advocates to tribal leaders. The letter’s message, however, didn’t hold up after two group members departed the coalition, leading to a separate apology emailed to tribal leaders days later.

The small group of advocates behind the letter, who call themselves The Ute Mountain Gun Violence Prevention Coalition,” formed with ties to the Denver-based Colorado Ceasefire and other advocates, including a handful of Ute Mountain Ute tribal members.

But two women who were initially a part of the small, newly formed coalition – Monique Terpstra and Alfreda Armstrong – described a series of miscommunications behind the letter’s release.

In turn, after the letter was sent, tribal leaders told the two women that they were concerned about the messaging behind the demands.

“That letter wasn’t meant to slam our leaders,” Terpstra said. “They have a job that’s hard.”

Two days after the letter was sent, Laney Sheffer, Interim Executive Director of Colorado Ceasefire released an apology on behalf of the coalition to tribal leaders, attempting to shift responsibility for the first letter away from Terpstra and Armstrong and announcing that the two women had separated from the group.

“It was never our intention to cause strain or to disregard the complexities and responsibilities you carry in leading the Nation,” the apology said.

Death coincides with a gun violence prevention event

The first letter came after word of Destiny Whiteman’s death rippled through the community Tuesday.

According to a public affairs officer with the FBI Denver office, early on Aug. 12 the body of a woman was found near North Ute Street and Chief Miller Street in Towaoc after word from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Soon after, Duran Wade Lang was arrested on homicide charges, according to the officer.

The timing aligned crucially with other happenings on the reservation. Only a week before, a [two-day awareness event on gun violence prevention was held at the Ute Mountain Casino](#), led in partnership with Colorado Ceasefire, a Denver-based advocacy group working to prevent shootings in the state.

People began to take action. Colorado Ceasefire, a few members of the tribe and others organized a group chat to start the Ute Mountain Ute Gun Violence Prevention Coalition. The group then sent a letter to tribal leaders, demanding change around gun safety.

According to the first letter, sent that evening, the coalition included Wendy Laner, a victim advocate for the tribe and a sister of Whiteman's. The letter said Whiteman left behind a 5-month-old baby and claimed she had been murdered by the baby's father. Gun violence was implicated.

In the letter, the coalition calls on "the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Leadership to declare a State of Emergency in response to rising gun and domestic violence impacting the community."

After citing statistics on broad rates of domestic violence and gun violence, the letter states that "these risks are compounded by underfunded services, jurisdictional gaps and delayed responses on tribal lands. Without urgent, systemic intervention, the cycle continues."

The letter was sent Tuesday at 8:45 p.m. and emailed to Ute Mountain Ute Chairman Manuel Heart, Tribal Council members and other tribal officials, as well as several news outlets, including *The Journal*.

Details emerge behind the letter

The Journal spoke with two people initially involved with the coalition who later severed their ties. *The Journal* also reviewed text messages among coalition members exchanged in the letter's lead-up.

Monique Terpstra, a Ute Mountain Ute, and Alfreda Armstrong, who is Southern Ute, Southern Cheyenne and Caddo Nation are both deeply rooted in the community through the [Western Slope Native American Resources Center](#).

In addition to helping with social service access for Natives, the center's priority has been on facilitating Wellbriety healing circles, especially since Whiteman's death hit the community.



Wellbriety advocate Alfreda Armstrong, left, and Western Slope Native American Resources Center director Monique Terpstra burn sage after a Wellbriety healing circle in Towaoc. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



Although both women were initially involved with the gun violence coalition, they said the letter had been rushed, and not everyone was on board with it.

Armstrong's names, phone number and email were placed at the end of the letter as a media contact, seemingly leaving her alone on the matter.

"I don't appreciate how my name was the only name on the letter," she said. "I felt like I was used as a scapegoat for Colorado Ceasefire."

Both women said they felt the responsibility for the letter had been placed on them.

They also said the letter was sent prematurely, based on unclear texts, and they couldn't properly review everything. Some group messages encouraged members to comment before the letter was sent, however.

Terpstra and Armstrong said that in the days since the letter was sent, they'd been in conversations with members of the Tribal Council.

Tribal officials felt the demands implied they hadn't taken sufficient action in response to Whiteman's death, the two women said.

Neither the Ute Mountain Ute chairman nor the Tribal Council responded to emailed questions from *The Journal* regarding the letter.

"Council should have actually got that (letter) first and then went over it before it was sent out to the media," Terpstra said. "We could have all worked together to put something out."

Terpstra and Armstrong both noted that a support resource known as Community Critical Stress Debriefing was available on the reservation.

Terpstra, who said she is related to Whiteman, also noted that steps had been taken to investigate the death and that Whiteman’s family had been given additional support.

An apology letter soon follows

Two days after the first letter, Terpstra, Armstrong and members of the coalition communicated with one another, then released the second letter to tribal leaders. This time around, the letter finished with the interim executive director of Colorado Ceasefire, Laney Sheffel.

Sheffel declined to comment for this article, but directed *The Journal* to Sarah Tallbird-Watts, a coalition organizer and a Ute Mountain Ute tribal member.

Tallbird-Watts acknowledged that there had been miscommunication before the first letter was sent, but no harm was intentional.

Tallbird-Watts said, however, that there had been “a lack of response on behalf of council,” with regards to shootings in Towaoc generally. Tallbird-Watts declined to comment on the coalition’s reasoning for the apology.

“On behalf of the Ute Mountain Ute Gun Violence Prevention Coalition, I want to sincerely apologize for any undue pressure our previous communications may have placed on the Tribal Council and Tribal Leadership,” the letter begins. The letter goes on to say that the coalition aims to work collaboratively. Respect for the sovereignty of the council and recognition of the leadership’s efforts to address gun violence are priorities for the coalition, the apology letter said.

“Additionally, I would like to clarify that while Wellbriety and WSNARC were involved in the gun violence prevention events held at the Ute Mountain Ute Casino, and were considered a part of our coalition, they were not the leads for the dissemination of the letter sent on Tuesday, the 12th. They should not be held solely accountable and have since asked to be removed from this coalition.”

Using Wellbriety, there’s more work to do to address the collective grief, alongside the lingering traumas present for those in the community, Terpstra and Armstrong said.

“We have to start healing from the inside out,” Armstrong said.

Bailey Duran, a reporter with The Journal, contributed to this article.

This article was updated Friday night to correct the title of Laney Sheffel, interim executive director of Colorado Ceasefire and to include Alfreda Armstrong’s tribal background.

This article was updated Saturday morning to correct one instance in which Destiny Whiteman’s last name had been misspelled.

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