



City of Kotzebue, Alaska
Police Department

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Roger Rouse, Chief of Police



To the Kotzebue Community,

Since the news articles about several deaths in Kotzebue were published by the Anchorage Daily News, past traumas and pain have been reopened in our community. These difficulties are not lost on me or on your police department. The tragedy around the death of Jennifer Kirk in 2018 is one of many that weighs on our hearts. We need to advise the public that reading this letter may be disturbing for some community members. We advise anyone that may need support after reading the information in this letter to contact the nearest behavioral health service line if needed or wanted. Maniilaq Behavioral Service can be contacted at: 907-442-7640 or by visiting <https://www.maniilaq.org/suicide-prevention/>

Many in our community have raised concerns or questions about Jennifer's untimely death. I wanted you to hear from me directly on how the investigator assigned to the case took care to investigate Jennifer's passing, and what the process looked like so you have as much information as possible to make informed decisions about what you read, see, or hear.

When the Kotzebue Police Department received the emergency call about Jennifer, our officers immediately responded and found an absolutely devastating situation. Rural Alaska is challenged with not being able to have a medical examiner on-site and therefore, the City of Kotzebue Police Department acts in place as both the investigator and assists the medical examiner for death investigations. As in all death investigations, we adhered to Alaska State Law (A.S.) 12.65.005 and reported the death to the medical examiner. The statute required that we perform an on-scene investigation and then, because of our distance, take Jennifer to a place where the medical examiner could conduct their own investigation, which required us to take Jennifer to Anchorage, in this case.

The Kotzebue Police Department investigator spent at least sixteen days interviewing witnesses, collecting evidence, and following up leads before closing the case. The medical examiner has the ultimate authority in determining the cause of death. After a thorough review of the evidence and postmortem autopsy, the medical examiner determined there was no evidence that Jennifer had in any way been strangled prior to her death that day. There was also no evidence that anyone other than Jennifer fired the gun that ended her life. Some have expressed concern whether it would have been physically possible for Jennifer to fire the rifle. Measurements taken of both Jennifer's body and of the firearm show that it was.

I know this is hard to hear. This is not something any family or community should experience, nor is it anything we as your peace officers want to encounter. The loss is devastating, and we extend our sincerest condolences to Jennifer's family and friends.

While I welcome members of the community evaluating the evidence for themselves, I caution there is danger of coming to erroneous conclusions when it is done with incomplete information or by those without investigative experience. Sharing those conclusions and the speed with which they spread can create real harm to those who knew and loved Jennifer.

I met with a member of Jennifer's family and their representative on Dec. 18, 2023, to answer their questions, provide them information on Jennifer's case, and to let them know that I had welcomed the Alaska Bureau of Investigations to independently review Jennifer's case. The Captain in charge of the Alaska Bureau of Investigations was also present when the Kotzebue Police Department met with the family member. Having reviewed the case, the Bureau informed Jennifer's family member and their representative that nothing in the investigation as it stands would change the sad conclusions of the incident. We will continue to support Jennifer's family as they process this heartbreaking tragedy.

Something I do want to note to you: we are aware of the domestic violence history in this case, and in others. I want to be clear: I strongly and vehemently condemn that. No one should ever think that it is ok to abuse another and cause harm. Those who would do harm *should* face consequences. While it is not my decision, nor my department's, on prosecuting or sentencing those incidents, I do want you to know that I denounce domestic violence in the strongest possible terms. It is ultimately up to the District Attorney whether to prosecute the perpetrator. It is ultimately up to the courts on the sentencing decision for perpetrators.

As a member of the Alaska Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Working Group, managed by the US Department of Justice in Anchorage, we are actively working to provide more resources and more education around this endemic problem in Alaska:

<https://www.aknwrc.org/>

<https://www.justice.gov/tribal/mmip>

And while many of you have asked about Jennifer, others have also inquired about Susanna Norton's ongoing homicide investigation.

Susanna is not forgotten. We know that many find similarities in the location, family involved, and other circumstances surrounding her murder. I understand that. As your Chief, I want you to know that we reached out to the Alaska Bureau of Investigations and asked them in 2021 to review the investigation. The Alaska Bureau of Investigations / Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Unit is actively working on Susanna Norton's case, and we will do everything we can to assist them in bringing it to a conclusion. I am sure the Alaska Bureau of Investigations / Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Unit will provide updates to us and to the community as they move forward.

I will continue to share information and answer questions. You deserve to have as much information as possible.

Chief Roger Rouse