

Robins Kaplan LLP Files Complaint Against Social Media Giants Meta, Snap, TikTok on Behalf of Spirit Lake Nation, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin

Firm's American Indian Law and Policy, Mass Tort Groups to Represent Native Nations in First-of-Its-Kind Lawsuit

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News

Today, Robins Kaplan LLP filed a first-of-its-kind lawsuit on behalf of the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota and the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin against entities that include Facebook and Instagram parent company Meta Platforms, Inc., Snap Inc., TikTok parent company ByteDance, and Alphabet Inc., which owns YouTube and Google.

The complaint alleges that rampant social media addiction for Native American teenagers is contributing to suicide rates that are staggeringly higher than their adolescent counterparts. The Center for Native American Youth notes that Tribal teen suicide rates are roughly 3.5 times higher than the national average in the United States. And for female Indigenous teens, the grim figure balloons even more, with a suicide rate that is over five times greater than their white peers, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"This lawsuit follows a growing body of scientific research, which includes, as alleged, previous non-public studies from the Defendants, and draws a direct line from harmful features on social media to the youth mental health crisis happening in this country," said Tara Sutton, Chair of Robins Kaplan LLP's National Mass Tort Group.

The complaint notes the Defendants listed in this lawsuit are targeting kids as a core market, hooking them in with addictive features and failing to implement effective parental controls or age-verification processes. According to a Colorado School of Public Health survey from 2020, 65.3% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth ages 15-24 have previously reported logging onto social media platforms for 3-7 hours a day.

Chairperson Lonna Jackson-Street of Spirit Lake Nation said, "Given historic teen suicide and mental health issues on our Reservation and across Indian Country, Native youth are particularly vulnerable to the negative long-term effects resulting from the intentional, profit-driven design choices being made by these social media platforms."

Gena Kakkak, Chairwoman of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, added, “Enough is enough. Endless scrolling is rewiring our teenagers’ brains. We are demanding these social media corporations take responsibility for intentionally creating dangerous features that ramp up the compulsive use of social media by the youth on our Reservation.”

The complaint details how U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy told CNN last year that he’s discouraging anyone 13 years old and younger from joining social networks, as the “skewed and often distorted environment” can impact their self-worth and relationships.

Tim Purdon, Chair of Robins Kaplan LLP’s American Indian Law and Policy Group and former United States Attorney for North Dakota, added, “These social media giants have generated hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue, our complaint alleges, using a growth-at-all-costs strategy that comes at the expense of Native children and teenagers and the Tribal Nations they are part of. With this historic filing, Robins Kaplan’s American Indian Law and Policy Group again stands with Tribal Nations to protect their sovereignty and their people.”

Robins Kaplan LLP is the first law firm to represent federally recognized Tribes in a case combating the harmful effects of social media use on youth in the United States.

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