



U.S. Department of the Interior

Guide to Tracing Your American Indian Ancestry

Office of Public Affairs - Indian Affairs
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Establishing Your American Indian Ancestry

Some people want to become enrolled members of a federally recognized tribe. Others want to verify a family tradition (belief, fact or fiction, passed from generation to generation) that they descended from an American Indian, either in their distant or near past. While others might want just to learn more about the people they descend from and where they lived.

When establishing descent from an Indian tribe for membership and enrollment purposes, the individual must provide genealogical documentation. The documentation must prove that the individual lineally descends from an ancestor who was a member of the federally recognized tribe from which the individual claims descent.

When people believe they may be of American Indian ancestry, they immediately write or telephone the nearest Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) office for information. That is not the best place to start. Many people think that the BIA retrieves genealogical information from a massive national Indian registry or comprehensive computer database. *This is not true.* Most BIA offices, particularly the central (headquarters, Washington, DC) and area (field) offices do not keep individual Indian records and the BIA does not maintain a national registry. The BIA does not conduct genealogical research for the public.

Benefits and Services Provided to American Indian & Alaska Natives

- **The Myth of the Monthly Check**

There has long been a myth that Indians receive a monthly check from the U.S. Government because of their status as Indians. There is no basis for this belief other than misinformation and misconception of the status of American Indians. Some tribes, tribal members and lineal descendants received payments from the Federal Government resulting from claims settlements. But there are very few judgment funds per capita payments that remain today.

Some tribes distribute payments to enrolled members when revenues from the sale of tribal assets such as timber, hydroelectric power or oil and gas permit. Many tribes cannot make per capita payments because they do not have natural resources or other revenue from which they make a fund distribution.

Some tribes have successful businesses that do defense contracting, operate casinos and information technology companies, sell spring water and make candy. If profits warrant it, and tribal members approve it. Funds from those operations can be paid out as monthly, yearly or occasional stipends to tribal members.

There is a clear distinction between judgment funds and tribal funds. Judgment funds are appropriated by Congress after a claim that is filed by tribes or Indian descendant groups against the United States, is settled. Tribal funds are derived from tribal assets (refer to paragraphs above). An individual does not have to be an enrolled member of a tribe to receive a final

judgment fund payment. An individual must be an enrolled member of a tribe to be eligible to receive payments derived from tribal assets.

- **Services for American Indians**

Indian Affairs, through its government-to-government relationship with federally recognized tribes, carries out the Federal Government's unique and continuing relationship with, and responsibility to tribes and Indian people. Indian Affairs programs support and assist federally recognized tribes in the development of tribal governments, strong economies, and quality programs. The scope of Indian Affairs programs is extensive and includes a range of services comparable to the programs of state and local government, e.g., education, social services, law enforcement, courts, real estate services, agriculture and range management, and protection of natural resources.

Many Federal agencies other than the Indian Affairs have special programs to serve the American Indian population, i.e., the Indian Health Service (IHS), an adjunct of the Public Health Service, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The IHS provides health care services through a network of reservation-based hospitals and clinics. Besides standard medical care, the agency has established programs that specialize in maternal and child health, mental health, substance abuse, home health care, nutrition, etc. The Administration for Native Americans, another agency within DHHS, administers programs aimed at strengthening tribal governments and supporting the social and economic development of reservation communities. Other agencies of the Federal Government that serve the special needs of Indian people include the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Agriculture, Education, Labor, Commerce and Energy.

All American Indians & Alaska Natives, whether they live on or off reservations, are eligible (like all other citizens who meet eligibility requirements) to receive services provided by the state such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the Food Stamp Program and the Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

Enrollment in a Federally Recognized Tribe

- **What is the purpose of tribal enrollment?**

Tribal enrollment requirements preserve the unique character and traditions of each tribe. The tribes establish membership criteria based on shared customs, traditions, language and tribal blood.

- **What are tribal membership requirements?**

Tribal enrollment criteria are set forth in tribal constitutions, articles of incorporation or ordinances. The criterion varies from tribe to tribe, so uniform membership requirements do not exist.

