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## State Recognition of American Indian Tribes

*By Martha Salazar*

State-tribal relations have a long and complex history in the United States. States' government-to-government relationships with tribes continue to evolve, taking many forms, including formal recognition. Usually accomplished through legislative action, state recognition of American Indian tribes is just one tool used to build state-tribal collaboration.

State tribal recognition does not confer the same benefits as federally recognized tribes; it acknowledges tribal status within the state but does not guarantee funding from the state or federal government. State-recognized Indian tribes are not necessarily federally recognized; however, some federally recognized tribes are also recognized by states. Federal recognition remains the primary way in which tribes seek to be recognized.

Tribes do seek state recognition, however, because it acknowledges their historical and cultural contributions. In some cases, state recognition qualifies the tribe for federal and state support. For example, four federal agencies—the U.S. departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services—have the statutory and regulatory [authority to provide funding](#) for state-recognized tribes. Some states authorize tribal participation on state commissions that typically make policy decisions that affect American Indians. State tribal recognition in this publication specifically refers to states that have created a formal process for recognition.

### State Action

There are 63 [state-recognized tribes](#) in 11 states—Alabama, Connecticut, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Vermont and Virginia. Since 2010, at least 20 states have considered legislation that would adopt a formal process for recognizing tribes.

The [North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs](#) provides education and technical assistance to tribes in the Tar Heel State. State statute authorizes the commission to legally recognize tribes and defines the procedures for doing so. Commission membership includes representatives from the eight state-recognized tribes, members of the General Assembly and the heads of various state agencies. Although the state doesn't provide an appropriation to the tribes, the commission allows for key stakeholder engagement in areas such as education and housing.

Alabama code authorizes the [Alabama Indian Affairs Commission](#) to establish state recognition procedures in administrative rules. The state recognizes nine tribes. The commission consists of tribal and state representatives and is charged with effectively and fairly dealing with Indian affairs. The commission serves as a liaison to many state agencies.

### Did You Know?

- Eleven states have officially recognized more than 60 tribes.
- There are 567 federally recognized tribes in the United States.
- State recognition is most commonly authorized by state legislatures.




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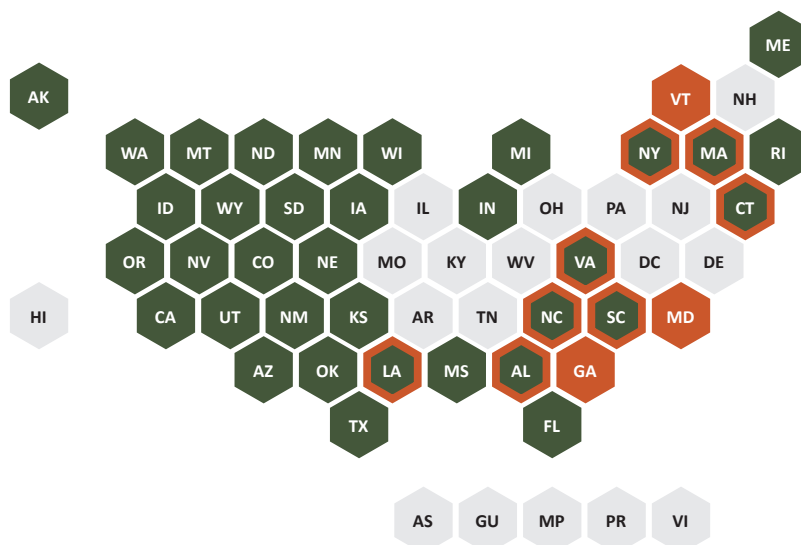
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## Tribal recognition

-  States with federally recognized tribes
-  States with both federally and state-recognized tribes
-  State-only recognized tribes



[Connecticut](#) recognizes five tribes and establishes state tribal reservations. Vermont, the most recent state to establish a formal process through legislation in 2010, set forth criteria for state recognition and provided official recognition to four tribes. The [Vermont Commission on Indian Affairs](#) is responsible for recognizing tribes and providing resources to the tribal populations.

Some states without a formal process for recognition acknowledge the historical and cultural contribution of tribes. The Texas Legislature, for example, adopted resolutions to honor particular tribes that are not federally recognized. The Montana Legislature adopted resolutions supporting the federal recognition of the Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians and includes tribal eligibility for certain state grant programs in state statute. In California, the [Native American Heritage Commission](#) is required to keep a list of non-federally recognized tribes that meet certain criteria with whom city and county governments must consult when they amend a general plan.

## Federal Action

There are currently 567 [federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes](#) in 35 states. The process for federal recognition is long (it can take decades), complicated and requires specific historical and identity requirements. Federal recognition gives tribes legal status and requires the federal government to provide certain benefits. Federally recognized tribes have a government-to-government relationship with the United States. According to the [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#), federally recognized tribes possess certain inherent rights of self-government (i.e., tribal sovereignty) and are entitled to receive selected federal benefits, services and protections because of their [special relationship](#) with the United States. In 2015, the Pamunkey Indian Tribe became the most recent tribe to receive federal recognition. It is also a state-recognized tribe in Virginia.

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[Database of State-Tribal Legislation](#)