

The N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs

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In the mid-1900s, American Indian communities in North Carolina were struggling for survival, facing many adversities, and without a voice in local or state government. These communities were, for the most part, extremely low-wealth areas, where few educational or economic opportunities existed. The national Civil Rights era and the American Indian Movement (AIM) of the 1960s and 1970s helped to change things. A big step forward happened in 1971, when the General Assembly created the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs at the request of tribal leaders in the state. Let's learn more about this special organization.

The creation of the commission provided the first chance for the state to work directly with Indian leaders to address issues of concern and to set the stage for positive socioeconomic change for Indian communities. Through the commission, the state could bring together a group of hard working and dedicated leaders, staff, and volunteers who could apply old-fashioned teamwork to meet common goals. The commission began by preparing grant proposals and submitting them to state and federal agencies for funds. Through that process, resources became available to address the needs of the state's Indian communities and Indian citizens.

Today, the commission coordinates and helps with many programs and events. For example, it sponsors an Educational Talent Search Program, which offers education and career counseling to youth ages eleven to twenty-seven in several counties where test scores are low, many students drop out of school, and unemployment levels are high. The program includes study skills and test-taking workshops, college campus tours, assistance in finding financial aid for college, leadership opportunities, cultural field trips and events, and more. Other work areas for the commission include job development, services for the elderly and disabled, and health awareness and prevention of substance abuse. The commission works with other groups to coordinate and sponsor events that include the N.C. Indian Unity Conference, the N.C. Indian Youth Unity Conference, Indian Heritage Month activities such as the American Indian Heritage Celebration (see page 36), and the N.C. Indian Senior Citizens Conference. The commission helps to make the public more aware of Indians in North Carolina. It promotes and protects understanding and pursuit of Indian traditions and cultures.

The purpose of the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs is to advocate for (or support and promote) Indian communities, tribes, and organizations, and to bring together local, state, and federal money and other resources that can help. It works with government agencies and other groups. The commission paved the way for tribally administered programs and for the delivery of services into Indian communities by tribes and the commission itself. Since 1971, tribal governments have evolved from having very limited resources into

being able to provide much-needed services and job opportunities. They have greater influence at all government levels.

The eight state-recognized Indian tribes and four state-recognized urban Indian associations all hold membership on the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs by statute, or state law. Tribes and organizations elect their representatives to the commission through procedures each has established. The General Assembly appoints two commission members, one by the Speaker of the House of Representatives and one by the president of the Senate. Five people serve on the commission by virtue of their appointed positions in state government: the secretary of the N.C. Department of Administration, the chairman of the N.C. Employment Security Commission, the secretary of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the secretary of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, and the commissioner of the N.C. Department of Labor. Two youth groups are represented by ex officio, or nonvoting, members: the chairperson of the N.C. Native American Youth Organization and the chairperson of the N.C. Native American Council on Higher Education. A paid commission staff coordinates programs and services.

The General Assembly provides money for staff salaries and other administrative costs. Most programs are funded through grants and by organizations such as the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Labor, N.C. General Assembly, and N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.

Through the commission, appointments are made to some related organizations:

- N.C. Indian Housing Authority—The commission gets nominations from member tribes and organizations and forwards them to the governor for appointment. The General Assembly, at the request of the commission, created this group in the late 1970s for the purpose of developing housing programs and initiatives in Indian communities.
- N.C. Advisory Council on Indian Education—The commission gets nominations from member tribes and organizations and forwards them to the State Board of Education for appointment. At the request of the commission, the General Assembly created this council. It reviews and studies the educational needs and concerns of American Indian students in North Carolina; makes recommendations to the State Board of Education as needed; and publishes an annual report.
- N.C. Indian Economic Development Initiative (NCIEDI)—The chairperson of the commission's Economic Development Committee serves as the chairperson of NCIEDI, a nonprofit development organization. The commission created the NCIEDI as part of its year 2000 strategic plan. Its purpose is to study the economic development needs of American Indian communities, conduct surveys, and develop plans to create job opportunities as well as create or expand businesses.
- N.C. Indian Cultural Center—The commission gets nominations from member tribes and organizations and appoints members to this center's board of directors. State statute authorizes a nonprofit organization to manage the center, located in

Pembroke, and to plan programs and activities focused on the state's Indian culture. The commission meets every three months to address needs and concerns. Through all of these efforts, the state's American Indian citizens keep moving forward.

At the time of the publication of this article, Gregory A. Richardson was the executive director of the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs. He is a member of the Haliwa-Saponi tribe. He served as one of the conceptual editors for this issue of Tar Heel Junior Historian.