



The Census Project

February 4, 2019

Dear Representative:

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and its Census Task Force Co-Chairs, NALEO Educational Fund and Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, and The Census Project,¹ we write to urge your commitment to an adequate, timely investment in 2020 Census preparations as you negotiate the final spending bills for FY 2019. The Census Bureau must have an uninterrupted funding ramp-up, from final preparations this year through peak operations in 2020, to help ensure the success of this constitutionally-mandated national activity. Equally important is certainty as to level of resources and congressional directives, to guide activities and schedule for the remainder of the fiscal year.

The partial government shutdown that ended on January 25 severely threatened these objectives. We know that the Census Bureau tried to reassure lawmakers and the public that it has sufficient fiscal resources to continue 2020 Census activities on schedule and at full scope through April. While we appreciate the Bureau's commitment to fulfilling its mission under difficult circumstances, the lack of transparency makes it impossible to evaluate these statements. Of related and equal concern, Census Bureau leadership cannot plan for expanded 2020 Census activities (as highlighted in recent versions of committee bills) without certainty about the Bureau's full year funding level, or at least knowledge of when additional funds will become available.

Early in the recent government shutdown, the Bureau estimated that forward funding for 2020 Census activities would last six to eight weeks, but later doubled this projection. This significant revision suggests that some activities are being streamlined, paused, or not carried out at the pace necessary to ensure robust preparations in the field. For example, municipal officials have told us that the opening and staffing of at least some Early Area Census Offices are delayed because negotiations with contractors who will build-out the office space have slowed.

Several other census activities have been put at risk. These include:

New Elements to Census Plan. The Census Bureau added elements to its census plan that were not covered by the administration's budget request. The Bureau increased the number of Partnership Specialists it plans to hire this year by 50 percent — from 1,000 to 1,500. Stakeholders support this increase and have been urging the Bureau to hire up to 2,000 partnership staff to meet the growing need for robust partnership with trusted messengers in hard-to-count communities. However, these employees are being hired and on-boarded too slowly to be fully effective in educating and assisting field partners, including state and local government officials and community-based organizations, many of whom have started to create their own outreach campaigns earlier than in the past. The Census Bureau should be out in front of these important supplemental partner efforts, instead of ramping up partnership activities later in the year.

¹ The Leadership Conference is a coalition of more than 200 national organizations committed to promoting and protecting the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States. The Census Project is a broad-based network of business, civic, and academic groups committed to a full, fair, complete, and accurate 2020 Census.

The uncertainty surrounding the inclusion of a citizenship question to the 2020 Census form presumably requires the Census Bureau to prepare for a census along two tracks: one with, and one without, the new question. Furthermore, the growing fear in some communities about census participation will require new messaging and expanded communications efforts that address the understandable suspicion about the citizenship question. The Census Bureau also recently announced a new national field test of 480,000 homes for next summer, to evaluate the implications of the proposed citizenship question for self-response and communications strategies. The Bureau presumably is preparing for that large test, which suggests that the funds for this activity are coming from other activities. Modified plans for enumerating communities devastated by wildfires, hurricanes and other natural disasters in the past year (as well as consultation with those communities) also require more attention.

Consultation with Experts and Advisors. Additionally, the Census Bureau halted vital consultation with experts on its advisory committees during the shutdown. Members of the National Advisory Committee and Scientific Advisory Committee offer in-depth feedback and advice on key census operations and outreach activities. Failure to keep committee members informed in real time about final preparations, early field operations, and development of the communications campaign could deprive the Census Bureau of a vital early warning network for emerging challenges and barriers to full participation as 2020 approaches. Similarly, events designed to identify innovative solutions to pressing census challenges, such as The Opportunity Project Demo Day, were postponed. As with all activities related to the 2020 Census, timely outreach and consultation is paramount, since the “census clock” is unforgiving and continues to tick down to the start of peak operations in less than a year.

Final Clearance of 2020 Census Operational Plan. We also must note that the shutdown delayed OMB’s review of the Commerce Department’s request for final clearance, under the Paperwork Reduction Act, of major elements of the 2020 Census operational plan (including the questionnaires and mail materials), as well as the public’s opportunity to comment on the plan in a timely way.

American Community Survey and Other Surveys. Beyond the 2020 Census, we are concerned about the suspension of the American Community Survey (ACS, formerly known as the “census long form”), a vital component of the decennial census that provides policymakers at all levels of government and the private sector with socio-economic data that guide hundreds of billions of dollars in resource allocations and investment decisions. The shutdown already stopped final data collection for 2018 and nearly a month of data collection in 2019, which could affect the quality and usefulness of ACS data for both years. Furthermore, analysis of 2018 ACS data was put on hold, which could delay release of these data in the fall. In addition, the ACS often serves as a bell-weather for possible challenges to survey participation in the field, which clearly could affect 2020 Census participation. The shutdown deprived the Census Bureau of this operational test-bed at a key point in the decennial census cycle.

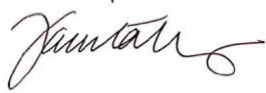
Moreover, economic surveys not conducted on a reimbursable basis for federal agencies that have received FY 2019 funding, as well as tabulation of data from the 2017 Economic Census (already fielded six months late due to delayed enactment of the FY 2018 appropriation), were suspended. According to a recent CBO report, which concluded that the shutdown cost the U.S. economy a net \$3 billion, “federal statistical agencies’ inability to publish economic data increased uncertainty about the economy among investors, households, and policymakers. Such factors were probably beginning to reduce investors’ confidence and to affect firms’ plans to invest and hire.” The Census Bureau collects much of the vital economic data CBO references. Restarting these important measurement tools is not a turn-key operation. Thus, at a time when Congress is closely

monitoring the economic effects of the shutdown, the government was unable to produce timely and reliable indicators and comparisons of economic activity and the economic health of various sectors and regions as a consequence of shuttered federal agencies.

Retention of Census Bureau Staff. Because all non-decennial census, non-reimbursable surveys were suspended during the shutdown, and because the fate of this work when the current Continuing Resolution runs out on February 15 is uncertain, the Census Bureau’s professional, permanent field staff may have begun looking for employment elsewhere. The loss of these well-trained survey takers would be devastating to the agency’s future ability to collect high quality data on which Congress and so many other decision-makers rely. In fact, the most qualified permanent field staff often are tapped to conduct the Post Enumeration Survey, the final decennial census operation that measures the enumeration’s accuracy.

The schedule for final census preparations and implementation is unrelenting. Unfortunately, the partial government shutdown has put a fair and accurate 2020 Census in jeopardy, and long term funding under a “clean” Continuing Resolution will continue to hamper final preparations, as well. Thank you for considering our views and working with census stakeholders to ensure the Census Bureau has the resources and spending flexibility it needs to conduct an inclusive, accurate, and efficient 2020 Census.

Sincerely,



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