



The Census Project

Don't Short Change the 2020 Census The Census Bureau Must Spend Available Resources Now

April 29, 2019

Dear Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Granger, Chairman Serrano, and Ranking Member Aderholt:

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 express our deep concern about the U.S. Census Bureau's Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 spending plan for final 2020 Census preparations. The window of opportunity to enhance and refine key census operations that are most likely to reach historically hard-to-count population groups is closing fast. We are alarmed that the administration has decided to carry over to FY 2020 more than \$1 billion in resources available for 2020 Census activities in FY 2019, in order to reduce the direct appropriation it has proposed for next year. In doing so, the administration is short-changing important 2020 Census outreach programs that Congress directed in report language accompanying both the FY 2018 and FY 2019 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies appropriations bills. We believe that the Census Bureau must expand or plan those programs now, in order to deploy them effectively and prudently in support of peak census operations next year. Therefore, we respectfully urge the Appropriations Committee to ensure that the Bureau is spending adequate resources now to meet the congressional directives outlined below.

The 2020 Census will be the largest, most difficult enumeration in our nation's history. The U.S. population is increasingly diverse — geographically, culturally, and linguistically — with households becoming more complex, and a greater share of residents falling into “harder to reach” categories. Further complicating preparations this year, extreme natural disasters, both in the recent past (e.g., hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and flooding) and likely over the course of the next year, will require modified, more costly census methods to ensure an accurate enumeration in recovering communities. In addition, the focus on internet response will be challenging for communities without reliable broadband service and households lacking internet access or familiarity.

As Congress has recognized, the 2020 Census also faces new challenges and risks. Former DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen recently warned that the 2020 elections will be the target of cyber-security attacks from foreign actors; the 2020 Census — as a civic activity fundamental to our representative democracy — most certainly is vulnerable, as well. Disinformation campaigns, much like we saw during the 2016 elections, could keep people from participating in the census. And a possible citizenship question would depress self-response rates and increase census costs, as even Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross acknowledged in announcing his decision last year to add the question.

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.

To address these challenges, the Appropriations Committee directed the Census Bureau to boost both the Partnership Program and targeted communications to levels of effort at least comparable to these activities for the 2010 Census. The Census Bureau was also directed to establish Questionnaire Assistance Centers in hard-to-count communities. Regrettably, we have seen little evidence that the Bureau is pursuing these goals in a meaningful way, despite the availability of roughly \$1 billion in FY 2019 resources above the president's budget request of \$3.015 billion — made possible by forward funding in the FY 2018 appropriations measure. If the Census Bureau fails to spend any of the additional resources in the current fiscal year, it is hard to see how it will meet these congressional directives without short-changing or delaying other important operations, such as In-Field Address Canvassing. Finally, we note that the administration did not request a 10 percent contingency fund for FY 2019, as Secretary Ross previously recommended and which appropriators assumed would be available by virtue of the additional resources that the administration has now walled off for FY 2020. Such a fund is vital to ensure full preparations this year, as changing circumstances — such as a 25 percent increase in the scope of address canvassing — already are likely to require more resources than originally projected.

We therefore urge the Appropriations Committee to require immediate and robust Census Bureau action to achieve the following goals:

1. Increase the number of Partnership Program staff and the pace of hiring and onboarding.

Partnership Program staff educate and mobilize states, localities, and community-based organizations in support of the census. Engaging "trusted messengers" is especially critical in reaching harder-to-enumerate population groups, including persons with disabilities, low-income rural and urban households, families with young children, Native Americans, limited English proficiency households, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals. Stakeholders have recommended an increase in Partnership Program staff from 1,500 to at least 2,000, moving the 2020 Census effort closer to the 2010 Census partnership staffing level.

The Census Bureau has pointed to its planned staffing level of 1,500 Partnership Specialists as evidence that the program is exceeding the 2010 Census effort. However, ten years ago, Congress allocated additional 2010 Census funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, in part to bolster the Partnership Program through a combination of Partnership Specialists and Partnership Assistants, for total program staffing of 3,000 in FY 2009 and 3,800 in FY 2010. Post-census evaluations found that the significant, rapid boost in staffing was difficult to manage well. That is why we have been urging an increase in Partnership Program staff since last year, and we are grateful that the Appropriations Committee supported that recommendation.

Regrettably, it appears that the Census Bureau has resisted this program expansion. Many local governments and community-based organizations started to engage, organize, and mobilize "trusted voices" in support of the 2020 Census much earlier than in previous census cycles, and the slow pace of hiring and on-boarding Partnership Specialists has left many stakeholders frustrated by their inability to obtain timely, accurate information about census operations from their regional census offices and partnership staff.

2. Expand targeted communications, including the availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate advertising and promotional materials, to boost participation among historically hard-to-count communities and population groups.

The Appropriations Committee recognized the importance of targeted advertising and outreach, which will help boost self-response in the face of the growing risks and challenges we outlined earlier. Higher self-response rates are crucial for two reasons: each one percent of households that self-respond saves \$55 million in door-to-

door follow-up costs; and, information collected during that follow-up operation generally is less accurate, which translates to lower quality data and a higher undercount.

Additional communications research and targeted messaging can help address: (1) the disproportionate undercount of young children, who often are left off census forms inadvertently; (2) disengagement of young mobile adults, including college students; (3) specific language assistance needs that are not a part of the current plan (including American Indian languages); (4) fear that government agencies will use personal census responses to harm people (as Census Bureau researchers discovered in 2017, leading them to warn senior staff and recommend additional research into ways to overcome those fears); and (5) confusion in communities recovering from natural disasters about how and where residents will be counted. In order to be effective, that expanded research must take place now, in order to inform creative development and media buys that target specific population groups at greater risk of undercounting.

We also are deeply concerned by the Census Bureau's diminished coverage of non-English languages in advertising, promotional, and instructional materials, compared to the 2010 Census, when promotional materials were available in 28 languages. The current 2020 Census plan envisions promotional materials for census partners only in 12 non-English languages, leaving many harder-to-enumerate communities without appropriate outreach materials. Stakeholders strongly recommend, at a minimum, the same level of language support provided in 2010, including through partnership promotional materials. Further, assistance guides in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander and American Indian and Alaska Native languages will help reduce the persistent disproportionate undercount of these smaller population groups. The additional resources Congress made available to the Census Bureau in FY 2019 can and should be used to expand the language assistance program in these ways.

3. Questionnaire Assistance Centers (QAC) in hard-to-count communities.

With a greatly reduced field infrastructure for the 2020 Census (half the number of regional and local census offices compared to 2010), and an emphasis on internet response, QACs will be a cost-effective way to help harder-to-count households answer the census safely and completely. The Census Bureau can partner with libraries, community and senior centers, high-traffic businesses, service agencies, and houses of worship to provide secure help in filling out census forms on-line or by phone. Staffing QACs at convenient hours with sworn census staff, hired locally, will increase access to "trusted messengers" and, therefore, confidence in the process.

We believe that early consultation with national and local partner organizations will help the Census Bureau plan a robust, effective QAC operation that addresses some of the program's weaknesses in 2010. More than 90 stakeholder organizations offered carefully developed recommendations for the QAC program to the Census Director last month; a copy of that letter is available [here](#).

4. Establish a contingency fund to cover costs not anticipated when the president submitted his FY 2019 budget request.

Finally, Secretary Ross proposed a ten percent contingency fund for FY 2019 in the revised lifecycle cost estimate he presented to Congress in October 2017. Yet, the president did not include a contingency fund in his budget proposal. The Commerce Secretary and Census Director have recently suggested that such a fund is no longer necessary because the risks facing the 2020 Census have diminished. Unfortunately, we do not believe their optimism is based on a comprehensive view of challenges the Bureau will encounter in 2020.

The additional resources Congress made available in FY 2019 should be applied, in appropriate portion, to a contingency fund that the Bureau can tap to strengthen cyber-security in the wake of continued foreign threats; understand and address research and test findings that significant percentages of some hard-to-count population groups might prefer to respond using paper questionnaires instead of on-line, as the Census Bureau had hoped; finalize the census plan amid uncertainty about the status of the proposed citizenship question; determine how best to attract and retain a qualified workforce in light of continued low unemployment; and other challenges that might be unique to a census occurring simultaneous to a hard-fought presidential campaign.

We are grateful to members of the Appropriations Committee for their support of a successful census and recognition that a responsible federal investment in robust final preparations for our nation's largest civic activity and cornerstone of our representative democracy can help contain costs over the long term. We urge you to ensure that the Census Bureau is spending available resources in the ways that Congress intended and before it is too late to bolster vital activities through cost-effective activities.

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,



Vanita Gupta
President and CEO
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights



Mary Jo Hoeksema
Director of Government Affairs, Population Association of America and Association of Population Centers, and co-director of The Census Project



Arturo Vargas
Chief Executive Officer
NALEO Educational Fund



Howard Fienberg
VP Advocacy, Insights Association, and co-director of The Census Project



John C. Yang
President and Executive Director
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC