The 2020 Census Needs Full-Year FY20 Funding Now

December 6, 2019

The Honorable Richard Shelby  The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairman  Chairwoman
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee  U.S. House Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC  20510  Washington, DC  20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy  The Honorable Kay Granger
Vice Chairman  Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee  U.S. House Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC  20510  Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Shelby, Senator Leahy, Congresswoman Lowey, and Congresswoman Granger,

As Congress works to finalize and pass the Fiscal Year 2020 appropriations bills, the stakeholders of The Census Project (www.thecensusproject.org) implore you to provide full-year funding for the 2020 Census as soon as possible, at least at the Senate committee-passed level, whether as part of a package of final spending bills or in a new Continuing Resolution — whichever vehicle will be enacted first in the coming weeks.

The constitutionally mandated 2020 Census has already started. Twelve weeks after the most recent FY20 Continuing Resolution (CR) (P.L. 116-69) is due to expire on December 20, U.S. households will begin receiving their 2020 Census materials, by mail or hand-delivery. Major census operations have already begun and critical final steps — from recruiting and screening staff, to verifying addresses, to finalizing outreach and advertising plans — are finished or underway.

We are grateful that the latest CR, funding the federal government through December 20, provides the Census Bureau with a temporary spending rate of $7.3 billion for the Periodic Censuses and Programs account, which includes a spending rate of at least $6.7 billion for the 2020 Census, for the duration of the CR. It also allows the Bureau to spend at least $90 million to implement a mobile Question Assistance Center program.

However, an accurate count is jeopardized without sufficient, on-time resources. The Census Bureau needs the certainty of full-year funding for the 2020 Census now, so that it can commit necessary resources for final preparations, major operations, and expanded activities targeting hard-to-count communities in rural, suburban and urban areas, without concern that its funding may fall short of need. Therefore, in the event Congress must pass a third CR, we respectfully request that the bill include a direct full year appropriation — rather than an apportioned appropriation — of no less than the Senate committee-reported amount of $6.7 billion for the 2020 Census ($7.3 billion for the Periodic Censuses and Programs account in the Commerce, Justice, Science (CJS) Appropriations bill) the same level provided in the second CR.
There is clear precedent for taking special care of census funding in a CR as the launch of peak counting operations approaches. In the prior decennial cycle, when not all full-year appropriations bills were completed on time at the start of FY10, Congress provided the Census Bureau with a full-year funding anomaly for its Periodic Censuses and Programs account in the first CR. We urge you to give the Census Bureau the same authority for 2020, should another CR be necessary.

Without funding certainty, the Census Bureau could be forced to curtail or delay important activities — from outreach and advertising, to cyber-security improvements, to hiring a full complement of census field staff — to prevent a funding shortfall later in the fiscal year. All major components of the census are equally important and intricately interrelated, and the Bureau can’t confirm the scope and carry out each operation in a timely way unless it knows how much money it will have for each and every vital operation throughout the full fiscal year. Further, sufficient, timely funding is critical to the Census Bureau’s capacity to address threats that could undermine the count — such as natural disasters, cyber-attacks, IT failures, disinformation campaigns, and low self-response (a significant risk given the first-time nature of the online portal and political controversies, which have diminished trust in the census in some communities). Full funding will allow the Census Bureau to reduce the risk of some of these threats, have plans ready to execute if these threats materialize, and execute contingency plans quickly, if necessary. Insufficient resources or funding uncertainty will hobble the Bureau’s ability to manage risk and counter threats.

An inaccurate census resulting from delayed or insufficient funding would jeopardize the availability and quality of data required for essential decision-making across the U.S. for the next decade, in both the private and public sectors. Everything from apportioning representation, to business investment and siting decisions, to guiding the geographic distribution of $1.5 trillion in federal funding every year,1 depends on an accurate 2020 Census.

In conclusion, we are gravely concerned about the timing of funding, which is so critically important at this stage of the 2020 Census. The Census Bureau cannot make up for lost time during final census preparations and implementation, as it works between two statutory deadlines: Census Day on April 1, 2020, and the December 31, 2020 requirement to deliver the state population counts used for congressional apportionment to the President. The window of opportunity to ensure a successful 2020 Census in all communities is closing. Congress should remove any uncertainty as to the full-year funding level for the 2020 Census, and provide much-needed spending flexibility and foresight in the process, by appropriating the full amount for the 2020 Census (as part of the Periodic Censuses and Programs account) in the next CR or in the final FY 2020 appropriations measure covering the Census Bureau, whichever comes first.

Thank you for prioritizing the 2020 Census as Congress finalizes FY20 spending measures.

Sincerely,

[insert orgs/companies signing]

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www.TheCensusProject.org
cc The Honorable Mitch McConnell
The Honorable Charles Schumer
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
The Honorable Steny Hoyer
The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
The Honorable Jerry Moran
The Honorable Jean Shaheen
The Honorable Jose Serrano
The Honorable Robert Aderholt