



# THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

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TOM COCHRAN

February 6, 2018

The Honorable Wilbur Ross  
Secretary of Commerce  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of a successful decennial census for municipalities across our nation. Census results determine the number of seats each state has in the House of Representatives, are used to draw political districts at federal, state and local levels, and affect the distribution of billions of dollars of federal funding annually to local communities for infrastructure and vital services like hospitals and schools. An inaccurate census leads to underrepresentation and fewer dollars for many of our most vulnerable communities.

We share the goal you have set for a full, fair and accurate 2020 Census. As such, we want to raise three areas of concern with you: adequate funding; qualified Census Bureau leadership; and rejecting untested questions that threaten to undermine census preparations and accuracy.

First, ensuring that the 2020 Census has the necessary resources to meet the challenges of enumerating a geographically, economically, culturally, and linguistically diverse population is foundational to its success. The Census Bureau must be able to implement effectively the range of data collection methods the 2020 Census will include, including new Internet and telephone response options and a traditional paper questionnaire. We were pleased that you requested an additional \$187 million for the Census Bureau in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, for a total of \$1.684 billion, in order to fund IT systems development (e.g. scalability; cyber-security systems) and system integration and readiness for the 2018 End-to-End Census Test.

However, this proposed increase does not include any additional funding for the Integrated Partnership and Communications program, which is essential to keeping long term census costs in check, given the growing barriers to a successful census. We are facing unprecedented challenges to a fair, accurate, and cost-effective census. Factors that could depress self-response rates considerably include the perception of cyber-security risks; real cyber-security threats; the

digital divide affecting rural, low income, minority, and older households; growing climate of fear among immigrants, regardless of their legal status; and growing anti- government sentiment in some communities.

To address these challenges, we urge additional resources to increase the number of Partnership Specialists in FY 2018 from the current 43 to 200, to help educate and guide state and local governments and vital “trusted voices” at the local level as they prepare to support the work of the Census Bureau during final preparations and early promotion in 2019 and execution of the count in 2020. Given the lower projected self-response rate embodied in your revised lifecycle cost estimate, we also urge a concurrent increase in the number of Area Census Offices, from the planned 248 to 300, to open in FY 2019. Finally, we believe new Census Bureau research documenting the growing reluctance of immigrants to participate (fully, if at all) in surveys and census tests will require expanded research and testing of effective messages and communications avenues to overcome this significant barrier to an inclusive enumeration.

**We urge to you to work closely with Congress in the coming weeks to ensure that the final FY 2018 omnibus appropriations bill includes not only the additional \$1.684 billion adjusted allocation the administration requested for the Census Bureau, but additional funds to expand the number of Partnership Specialists in 2018, expand messaging research and testing *before* the early communications campaign begins at the start of 2019, and a larger field footprint to enhance a projected higher number of households that require personal visits in the Nonresponse Follow-up operation.**

Secondly, the Census Bureau has long benefited from exceptional leadership, helping the agency carry out its mission of serving as the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy. The American people must have confidence that the Bureau's leaders will uphold its core principles of protecting confidentiality, sharing expertise, and conducting its work openly and fairly, without regard to partisan interests, and be guided by a commitment to scientific objectivity and excellence and research-based innovation.

Now, more than ever, the Census Bureau needs strong, permanent leadership to steer the agency through crucial preparations and implementation of the 2020 decennial count. To that end, we urge the president to nominate a highly qualified, nonpartisan candidate who is respected on both sides of the political aisle to be Census Director. At the same time, we are troubled by the administration's reported intent to appoint a candidate for Census Bureau deputy director whose body of professional work largely centers around achieving partisan advantage in the use of census data, and who lacks the traditional and requisite experience in managing a large organization like the Census Bureau and the complex operations of the decennial census.

**We urge the administration to put forward candidates for Census Director and Census Bureau Deputy Director who will continue the tradition of nonpartisan, experienced, and strong leadership. Any nomination or appointment that would undermine the credibility of the Bureau's role as a fundamentally nonpartisan statistical agency will further erode already fragile public trust and confidence in the integrity of the 2020 Census and, indeed, the objectivity of all Census Bureau statistics.**

Thirdly, the recent U.S. Department of Justice request to add a question about citizenship to the 2020 Census threatens the Census Bureau's ability to conduct an inclusive enumeration that accurately reflects the diverse fabric of America. The Constitution requires a count of all persons living in the United States on Census Day, *regardless of citizenship or legal status*. Since 1790, the decennial census has been the vehicle for this count and, to this day, Congress has rejected efforts to change the interpretation of this important tenet of the Constitution by basing apportionment on a subset of the population.

The Census Bureau spends years testing alternative questionnaire formats and designs. Changes to the census form at this late stage of 2020 Census planning jeopardize the validity of the operational tests that already have been conducted, put into question the outreach and partnership strategies that have been designed around different content, and would require changes in training and execution of operations. Robust, iterative testing of census methods and content is crucial to an accurate enumeration, with even the smallest changes to question order and wording potentially having adverse and unintended consequences for the success of operations and the accuracy of the data.

There are logistical and cost implications associated with adding a new question at this late point in the 2020 Census cycle. For example, the 2020 Census Operational Plan bases staffing levels on projected self-response rates that, in turn, the Bureau derived after carefully designed, iterative tests that did not include a question on citizenship. Adding a new question will nullify those prior projections and assumptions. Moreover, experts, elected officials, and community leaders all agree that adding a question on citizenship in particular will lower initial response, leading to an expanded Nonresponse Follow-up operation and increases in the field staff required to conduct door-to-door visits, thereby increasing the cost of the census considerably without improving accuracy.

Adding a citizenship question to the decennial census would not promote the constitutional mandate of the census, but in fact, may compromise it. Such a question would increase the burden on respondents, likely heighten privacy concerns around the census, and lower participation by immigrants who fear the government will use this information to harm them and their families. Furthermore, the Justice Department has not set forth new legal or programmatic reasons for the Census Bureau to collect this information from every household in the country since its initial cataloging of data requirements for the census and American Community Survey prior to the Census Bureau's submission of 2020 Census and ACS topics to Congress last spring.

**We urge you to reject the Justice Department's request to add a citizenship question to the decennial census and to ensure that the Census Bureau can focus its time and resources on finalizing and executing the current 2020 Census plan.**

Thank you for your attention to our concerns. We look forward to working closely with you to ensure the fair and accurate census our communities expect and deserve.

Sincerely,

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