

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 7, 2017

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

Mr. John DeStefano  
Director  
Office of Presidential Personnel  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Secretary Ross and Director DeStefano:

As you search for candidates to succeed Director John H. Thompson to lead the U.S. Census Bureau, we urge you to consider the importance of an accurate census count to the nation, the novel challenges that the 2020 Census presents, and the role a permanent director will play in ensuring budgetary and planning stability. We ask that you prioritize filling this vacancy.

The 2020 Census is little more than two years away and represents one of the greatest undertakings of our country: a constitutionally mandated count of all U.S. residents. With Mr. Thompson's resignation, the budget constraints facing the 2020 Census will be exacerbated by the absence of a permanent and dedicated director who understands the workings of the agency and can speak with authority on the agency's behalf.

Article I, Section 2, of the U.S. Constitution requires a census of all persons residing in the United States every ten years, as directed by Congress. This most basic component of our democracy—an accurate census—has been in place for over 220 years, starting with the first census in 1790. The decennial census is the cornerstone of our representative democracy as the basis for distributing the number of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives among the states—a determination that, in turn, affects the number of Electoral College seats each state has. Census data also are used to draw congressional and state legislative district lines, thus ensuring an equal voice in our democratic system of government for every American—an ideal embodied in the 14th Amendment.

In addition, the federal government allocates over \$600 billion annually in program funds to states, localities, and families based on census or census-derived data. Community leaders rely on accurate and reliable data to understand community needs, locate vital services, allocate fiscal resources prudently, and properly plan for the future. At the local level, government officials base infrastructure development and resource management decisions on census data. Businesses invest in job-creating initiatives, such as building new production and sales facilities, when census data demonstrate that opportunities exist in a given community. Non-governmental organizations use census data to target their limited resources to the most vulnerable communities with the greatest need.

An integral source of additional data is the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS). While the census counts the population every ten years, the ACS provides detailed, updated information about the nation’s population and states, counties and cities, towns and rural communities, and neighborhoods every year, giving policymakers an invaluable, timely tool to understand and address the nation’s needs. The ACS samples 3.5 million homes each year, producing annual data on education, housing, occupation, disability status, commuting patterns, income and poverty, ethnicity, veterans, and other vital social and economic characteristics. Congress requests, directly or indirectly, all of the data gathered in the ACS, and reviews the questionnaire each decade. The ACS provides broad-based, up-to-date data, and is thus critical to the ability of government and communities to assess trends and emerging challenges in a timely way.

Census data are so integral to a well-functioning government and to equitable access to federal, state and local benefits and services that public officials cannot adequately serve their communities if those data are not accurate and comprehensive. While the Census Bureau’s stated goal is to “count everyone once, only once, and in the right place,” the decennial census typically misses some people. If the census missed relatively equal percentages of people in all communities and demographic groups—e.g. urban, suburban, and rural; poor and wealthy; predominantly White and predominantly Black, Latino, AAPI, and Middle Eastern; young children and senior persons—then the resulting count would at least be fair for key purposes for which census figures are used, such as allocation of political representation and government funding for vital services and programs.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Scientific measurements of census accuracy since 1940 have shown a persistent, disproportionate undercount of certain population subgroups, which skews the results—and therefore the benefits that flow from the census—in favor of some communities over others. The census misses racial and ethnic minorities, low-income households (indicated by the proxy of homeowner vs. renter), rural communities, and young children (ages 0-4) at disproportionately high rates. These disparities between counts of non-Hispanic Whites and all other race groups, low- and high-income households, and young children and other age cohorts deprive underserved communities of their fair share of political power, government resources and, often, private sector investment.

While the Census Bureau has designed key operations to help reduce or eliminate these differential undercounts in 2020—including the Integrated Communications & Partnership Program, language assistance program, and door-to-door visits to unresponsive households—the agency needs adequate funding from Congress and thorough testing and evaluation to ensure their scientific and operational rigor. It also needs leadership from a highly qualified, well-respected director with experience managing a massive, complex undertaking and large workforce, and working with large datasets and scientific initiatives.

Early in the decade, Congress directed the Census Bureau to spend no more on the 2020 Census than it did on the 2010 Census, roughly \$13 billion, and less if possible. To meet this goal, the agency rolled out new cost-saving techniques to collect data—implementing an online questionnaire, using administrative records in place of in-person follow up to collect missing information, and shrinking the census workforce. Asking Americans to answer personal and

sensitive questions on-line —marking the first time in history that the Census Bureau is collecting information in this manner in the decennial census—raises cybersecurity concerns, both real and perceived by the public. Equally important, the so-called “digital divide” means that certain population groups—including people of color and rural, low income, and older residents—will have less opportunity to respond on-line, making it more likely their households will not be counted if resources are strained. While the Census Bureau must ensure that a quality information technology (IT) system, as well as a cybersecurity plan and knowledgeable personnel, are in place, it also needs a director who understands these new IT needs and challenges.

In two and a half years, the 2020 Census will be in full swing. In order to be ready for this complex undertaking, the Census Bureau must successfully complete preparatory activities including the 2018 End-to-End Census Test, which has already started with address canvassing and early hiring. Instead of completing all planned preparations, however, the Census Bureau has faced budget shortfalls and delays in recent years, resulting in canceled field tests, scaled back operations in the 2020 “dress rehearsal,” and delayed development of the advertising campaign. It has also reduced the use of new methods to update the Master Address File, which were intended to be more cost-effective and less labor-intensive than street-by-street canvassing. In fact, throughout the entire 2020 Census “lifecycle,” which runs from fiscal year (FY) 2012 through FY 2021, Congress so far has failed every year to allocate the amount of money the Census Bureau requested. In other words, the 2020 Census has been underfunded from the start.

As stated in testimony given by Secretary Ross to Congress in October 2017, the administration’s original FY 2018 budget request for the Census Bureau was too low, leading Secretary Ross, at the request of Congress, to make an adjusted request of an additional \$187 million. Additionally, the “lifecycle” cost estimate for the 2020 Census has now been increased by \$3.3 billion, from \$12.3 billion to \$15.6 billion, based on a review of key assumptions, such as projected self-response rates and enumerator pay rates. We appreciate the review conducted by the Commerce Department and the revised “lifecycle” cost estimate, as well as the requested funding increase for FY 2018.

However, we believe that the \$187 million alone is not sufficient to adequately prepare for the 2020 Census. In order to put the 2020 Census back on track and preserve and strengthen other vital Census Bureau data, the Census Bureau’s appropriations for FY 2018 and FY 2019 should reflect this new funding reality and would require leadership from the Census Bureau to ensure that funds are spent effectively.

With a more robust funding level, the Census Bureau could restore testing in rural and remote areas, which includes methods used on American Indian reservations and in Alaska Native villages, and develop and pay for a plan to ensure an accurate census in communities devastated by recent hurricanes and wildfires. Robust funding would also allow for a timely investment in activities designed to reach historically hard-to-count population groups, such as rural and low-income residents, by increasing the number of Partnership Specialists and expanding messaging research, which already is months behind schedule, to address public fears about cyber-security and data confidentiality and expand targeting to diverse hard-to-count communities.

The Census Bureau has one chance to get the count right and must complete the task on time to meet constitutional and legal requirements for congressional apportionment and redistricting. We understand that counting every American is an expensive endeavor. But efforts to reduce costs should not come at the expense of ensuring that all Americans are included in our decennial census. Achieving an accurate count will require an experienced, scientifically qualified and nonpartisan public servant to lead the Census Bureau, and we ask that you take these considerations into account when choosing the best candidate. A timely nomination is vital to avoid a lengthy leadership vacuum at a critical time in the decennial census cycle.

Thank you, and we look forward to working with you to ensure that the 2020 Census is successful in all communities and provides an accurate count of the U.S. population.

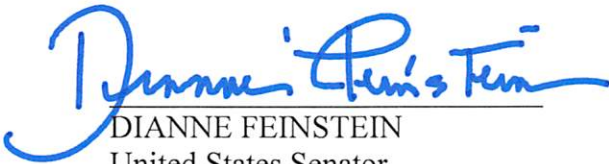
Sincerely,



BRIAN SCHATZ  
United States Senator



PATRICK LEAHY  
United States Senator




DIANNE FEINSTEIN  
United States Senator



JACK REED  
United States Senator



JOE MANCHIN III  
United States Senator



CHRIS VAN HOLLEN  
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AL FRANKEN  
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MAZIE K. HIRONO  
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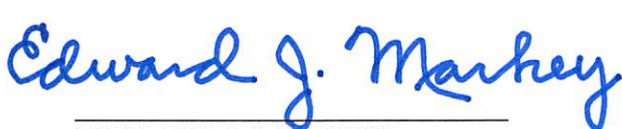
  
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