August 7, 2020

On behalf of the Triangle region of North Carolina, we are deeply concerned by Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham’s recent statement that 2020 census operations will be accelerated and field data collection completed by September 30, 2020. We oppose the Census Bureau’s plan to end door knocking efforts and self-response options a month earlier than previously planned. To give the Census Bureau more time to complete a full and accurate census count, we urge Congress to extend the statutory reporting deadlines for the 2020 census by an additional 120 calendar days.

The 2020 census operations have experienced significant delays and disruptions because of the coronavirus pandemic. As a result of the national public health crisis, several leaders within the Census Bureau have expressed doubt that they can finish decennial census and report initial results by the current December 31, 2020 statutory deadline. Director Dillingham stated in April 2020 that the Census Bureau was “seeking statutory relief from Congress of 120 additional calendar days to deliver final apportionment counts, which would allow for apportionment counts to be delivered to the President by April 30, 2021, and redistricting data to be delivered to the states no later than July 31, 2021.” Additional statements from Census Bureau leaders are as follows:

- Associate Director for Decennial Census Programs Albert Fontenot on July 8: “We are past the window of being able to get those counts by [December 31, 2020 at] this point.”
- Associate Director for Field Operations Tim Olson on May 26 during a National Congress of American Indians webinar: “We have passed the point where we could even meet the current legislative requirement of December 31” for delivering 2020 Census state population counts for reapportioning congressional seats among the states.
- An area manager who oversees local census offices on July 30: "It's going to be impossible to complete the count in time. I'm very fearful we're going to have a massive undercount."

Their concerns about ensuring the completeness and accuracy of the 2020 census are well-founded. Our current response rate is below the national rate and below where our state was in 2010. More than four in every ten North Carolina households have not yet filled out the 2020 census, representing more than 4 million North Carolinians not currently captured in the census. The coronavirus pandemic ramped up at a time when the Census Bureau and its national, state, and local partners around the country would have held in-person events and outreach opportunities to remind all households to respond to the census.

In addition, populations that are historically hardest to count – including low-income communities, highly-transient individuals, and minority populations – not only reside in areas that are falling behind in the 2020 national count, but have also been inequitably impacted by the health and economic effects of COVID-19. North Carolina communities that have not responded at high rates are predominantly rural, Black, and Brown, with low internet access.
Census operations taking place this summer and fall are designed to reach historically undercounted and low self-response groups. Census Bureau workers are going into on-the-ground counting operations with the lowest self-response rates in recent memory. By rushing this process, the federal government will undercount households historically missed by the census, putting vulnerable communities at greater risk of not receiving their appropriate share of funding and resources.

If census operations are cut short:

- Incomplete and inaccurate data will undermine the ability of the federal government to equitably and accurately disperse more than $1.5 trillion across 316 federal spending programs annually for state, regional, and local programs and services.
- Local government budgets and resources will be further constrained and unable to fund the needs of their vulnerable populations.
- Future long-term COVID-19 funding and resources will not be allocated efficiently to communities struggling most to recover.

It is no exaggeration that the 2020 census count will significantly impact every city, county, and region in America for the next decade, including the Triangle region. It is vital to our state that all North Carolinians be counted: the 2020 census ensures our state receives its fair share of more than $1.5 trillion in federal dollars from census-derived programs ($44 billion to NC in FY2017) and that these and state funds are distributed fairly across the state. For this reason, we adamantly oppose the condensed census operations timeline and ask Congress to extend the 2020 census statutory reporting deadlines by an additional 120 calendar days.

Sincerely,

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