



NHLA National Hispanic Leadership Agenda

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

September 8, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-220, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy,

We write on behalf of the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA), a coalition of the nation's leading Latino nonpartisan civil rights and advocacy organizations, to urge you to support extension of the statutory deadlines for delivery of 2020 Census apportionment and redistricting data. The accuracy of each decennial census is critically important to the economic and social advancement of our nation. The Census Bureau can only achieve a successful count of every resident in the correct location when conditions permit it to make every effort to find and contact each household, and when Americans have confidence in the government's commitment to and capacity for safeguarding their sensitive personal information. Unfortunately, the 2020 Census has coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has delayed and impeded critical Census operations, as well as community outreach. Engaging residents to respond to the Census has been increasingly difficult as families have struggled with the health and economic challenges of the pandemic. The Bureau has also experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining the workers needed for many of its operations. In recognition that these hurdles would make it necessary to spend an extended period of time collecting and refining 2020 Census data, the Bureau and the Administration asked Congress in April to allot the requisite time to produce high-quality data. Nearly six months later, we have reached a critical moment: if Congress does not act very soon on this request, there will be high risk of a failed Census on which government will have wasted more than \$15 billion in taxpayers' funds.

COVID-19 Has Severely Delayed and Impaired Census Operations

Disruptions to the conduct of the Census due to the spread of COVID-19 have been extensive and cascading. The pandemic became a national emergency just as the Census Bureau was commencing its campaign to elicit self-responses, and the need to ensure safe working conditions quickly forced the Census Bureau to reduce the number of staff in its call centers. Many people who wanted to ask questions or submit their responses by phone were frustrated by long waits on hold, and phone response volume has fallen short of the Bureau's pre-COVID expectations. The Bureau could not safely equip or

- Alianza Americas
- American G.I. Forum
- ASPIRA Association
- AVANCE Inc.
- Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network
- Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute
- Farmworker Justice
- Green Latinos
- Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities
- Hispanic Federation
- Hispanic National Bar Association
- Hispanics in Philanthropy
- Inter-University Program for Latino Research
- Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
- LatinoJustice PRLDEF
- League of United Latin American Citizens
- MANA, A National Latina Organization
- Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
- Mi Familia Vota
- NALEO Education Fund
- National Association of Hispanic Federal Executives
- National Association of Latino Arts and Culture
- National Association of Latino Independent Producers
- National Conference of Puerto Rican Women, Inc.
- National Day Laborer Organizing Network
- National Hispana Leadership Institute
- National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators
- National Hispanic Council on Aging
- National Hispanic Environmental Council
- National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts
- National Hispanic Media Coalition
- National Hispanic Medical Association
- National Institute for Latino Policy
- National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- National Latinx Psychological Association
- Presente.org
- SER Jobs for Progress National
- Southwest Voter Registration Education Project
- U.S.- Mexico Foundation
- UnidosUS
- United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- United States Hispanic Leadership Institute
- United States-Mexico Chamber of Commerce
- Voto Latino

train enumerators to go out into the field at the outset of the pandemic when sanitation supplies were particularly scarce. Thus, its Update/Leave operation was significantly delayed, and many households that were scheduled to receive hand-delivered materials instead of mailings did not hear anything about the Census until months after its beginning. The Bureau also suspended special operations to count the homeless population and people living in transitory locations like campgrounds and hotels, and as of this writing, the operations have not yet taken place.

Because initial data collection efforts fell behind schedule, the Census Bureau also had to postpone Nonresponse Followup (NRFU) visits to households that failed to submit their information online or by phone or to return a paper questionnaire. NRFU visits did not occur until July, by which time data collection during a normal decennial census year would have been concluding. All of these delays have complicated the Census Bureau's task, which is to produce a snapshot of U.S. residents as of April 1, 2020. The accuracy of individuals' answers about the composition of their households on Census Day progressively declines as more time passes, so responses captured in August or September will contain more errors than those captured earlier in the year.

The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges facing the Bureau in 2020, because large numbers of Americans have changed residences due to changing work and family care responsibilities, evictions and foreclosures. For example, when enumerators knock on doors today, they are far more likely than during a normal NRFU campaign to encounter vacant homes that were occupied on Census Day, or residences that would have housed college students in a typical year but that may be absent or in use by other populations by fall 2020. They will also find people whose fears of the consequences of Census participation have been intensified by the Administration's July 2020 announcement that it would exclude undocumented immigrants from apportionment counts. This announcement arrived about one year after Administration officials also declared that the Census Bureau would collect administrative records and publish data reflecting the citizenship status of all residents.

Pandemic-Related Disruptions Have Made It Impossible to Complete the Count and Produce Data by the End of 2020

As we draw closer to the close of data collection period, our organizations see an ever-increasing number of indicators that the Census Bureau is incapable of producing accurate data on its original, pre-pandemic timeline, because it has had to contend with substantial disruptions. First and most importantly, the Department of Commerce, the Trump Administration, and current and former top Census Bureau executives have said as much. An April 2020 statement from Commerce Secretary Ross and Census Bureau Director Dillingham stated, "In order to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau is seeking statutory relief from Congress of 120 additional calendar days to deliver final apportionment counts." On April 14, President Trump said of this request during a press conference, "In addition, while millions of Americans continue to complete their questionnaire online, the Census Bureau has asked for a 120 [day] extension. I don't know that you even have to ask them. This is called an act of god...I don't think 120 days is nearly enough." In May 2020, current Associate Director for Field Operations Tim Olson commented, "We have passed the point where we could even meet the current legislative requirement of December 31. We can't do that anymore." Associate Director for Decennial Census Programs Albert Fontenot echoed this thought when he said during a July 2020 webinar for Census

stakeholders, “We are past the window of being able to get those counts” by year’s end. In comments to the press, immediate past Census Bureau Director John Thompson compared completing the Census and delivering apportionment data to Congress by December 31, 2020 to asking an expectant mother to give birth after four or five months of pregnancy, while former Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt stated, “To finish the Census by the end of the year, COVID has got to go away, and it’s not.” Many frontline employees concur; an office operations supervisor recently told NPR on condition of anonymity, “There’s just not enough time to do all the work that needs to be done.”

The limited information available to the public about response rates and operational updates strongly supports Census professionals’ warnings that a rushed Census will fail. For example, there are enormous disparities between rates of Census participation in predominantly Latino communities and predominantly non-Hispanic white communities. As of August 31, 2020, in census tracts in which Latinos are the most numerous population group, the average self-response rate is 48.1 percent, more than 16.8 percentage points below the national average. Gaps widen in communities with large concentrations of “hard-to-count” residents, and the average self-response rate in tracts in which at least 80 percent of residents are Latino is more than twelve percentage points behind the average self-response rate in tracts in which 80 percent or more of residents are non-Hispanic whites.

Overall, a highly disproportionate share of those who remain to be counted are members of racial and ethnic minority communities that are chronically undercounted and that cannot be accurately enumerated with a rushed process that cuts corners. Unfortunately, anecdotal reports from temporary Census employees are increasingly revealing that the artificially condensed timeline is leading to enumerators being asked to perform just the sort of careless work that is guaranteed to exacerbate undercounts of youth, rural residents, Latinos, renters, and others who are frequently missed. For instance, in August an enumerator based in New Mexico told NALEO Educational Fund that they had been instructed to stop interviews after collecting a head count and detailed characteristics for the first person listed in order to save time; moreover, enumerators were only making two instead of the planned total of six visits to persistent non-responding households.

As of this writing, more than 10 percent of known households, and the entire populations of numerous group quarters, transitory locations, shelters and encampments remain to be counted over the course of just one month. The state of the Census is particularly precarious in jurisdictions such as New Mexico, in which about 20 percent of known households have not yet been enumerated.

Ultimately, for a sound enumeration, the Bureau must achieve the herculean feat of surmounting several serious obstacles, including the continued prevalence of COVID-19, the onset of flu season and the peak of hurricane and wildfire season. Even if it achieves this, it cannot complete an adequate or credible data refinement process in time to meet current statutory data delivery deadlines. To date, we know that the Bureau has eliminated its Count Review program that would have afforded states an opportunity to help the agency identify large mistakes and omissions. In 2010 this process led to discovery of more than 70,000 missing housing units and identification of several hundred group quarters that the Census Bureau did not know about or had assigned to the wrong location. Moreover, experts do not believe that the Bureau can

conduct de-duplication procedures if it is to cut in half the amount of time it dedicates to processing raw responses in order to publish apportionment data by December 31, 2020. In 2010, de-duplication helped the Census Bureau find and remove about 8 million extra person records. Eliminating these and other procedures from its plan to adhere to a timeline its own top advisors have repeatedly rejected as impossible would leave the Census Bureau in the untenable position of releasing data that do not meet its quality standards. These data would also fail to meet the needs of Census stakeholders in government and private industry.

Congress Has No Responsible Choice Other Than to Extend Census Deadlines

Ensuring the integrity and usefulness of decennial Census data is one of the most consequential tasks Congress has, because so many critical decisions, from division of power to allocation of trillions of dollars, are made using Census data. Latinos and the entire nation cannot afford for Congress to fail its mission to obtain the high-quality data we need to make economic and social progress over the coming decade. Members must act now to ensure that the Census Bureau has the time it needs and has requested to produce reliable information about Latinos and all Americans. The House of Representatives has adopted the deadline changes the Census Bureau requested in its HEROES Act, H.R. 6800; we call upon Senators to follow the House's example and enact extensions of Census data delivery dates as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arturo Vargas', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Arturo Vargas
Chair, Census Working Group

cc: Members of Congress