

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 21, 2017

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice,
Science, and Related Agencies
Senate Committee on Appropriations
142 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice,
Science, and Related Agencies
Senate Committee on Appropriations
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran, Vice Chairman Leahy, Chairman Shelby and Ranking Member Shaheen:

As you negotiate final spending for the current fiscal year (FY), we write to respectfully request that you include \$1.848 billion for the Census Bureau in the final FY 2018 omnibus appropriations bill as a minimum funding level. This amount is \$164 million above the administration's adjusted Census Bureau request for FY 2018—the original FY 2018 request of \$1.497 billion plus the additional \$187 million requested by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross. This level would fund Current Surveys and Programs at \$270 million (which is the Senate Appropriations Committee mark and equal to the FY 2017 appropriation) and Periodic Censuses and Programs at \$1.578 billion, including 2020 Census at \$1.127 billion. The 2020 Census mark reflects the adjusted administration request, as well as additional funds for development of the communications campaign under the Integrated Partnership and Communications contract, funds to increase the number of Partnership Specialists from 43 to 200 in FY 2018, and a \$50 million contingency fund proposed by Secretary Ross.

The 2020 Census is rapidly approaching, and the Census Bureau is considerably underfunded compared to the past three decennial censuses at parallel stages in the planning process. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities reported that funding for census activities in FY 2008 was 79 percent higher than for FY 2006. Yet proposed funding for FY 2018 is less than 10 percent higher than for FY 2016 in both President Trump's budget request and in the House of Representative's Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies appropriations bill.

An increase in funding is necessary to ensure an accurate and well-planned 2020 Census. Recently, Secretary Ross agreed and requested an additional \$187 million for FY 2018.

However, we believe this increase is not sufficient to address concerns with the Census Bureau's current deficiencies.

For example, Secretary Ross's \$187 million only includes funding for IT systems development and system integration and readiness for the 2018 End-to-End Census Test. It does not include funding for other preparatory activities, including the Integrated Partnership and Communications contract. The contract was awarded last year, but due to budget shortfalls in FY 2017, funding for most of its key activities was delayed. Therefore, messaging research and development of the communications campaign is well behind schedule and has not progressed in FY 2018 to date. Additional funding is needed to expand research into effective messaging for the growing number of population groups and communities at higher risk of undercounting, include those from areas affected by recent natural disasters, including hurricanes and wildfires.


Considering the Census Bureau's proposed 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—it is imperative that the agency have fully developed communications strategies to boost self-response rates. Effective outreach to communities with low response rates would improve the efficiency with which the 2020 Census is conducted by reducing future Census Bureau expenditures on Non-Response Follow Up operations.


This is just one example of how robust FY 2018 funding will meet preparation needs for the 2020 Census. The challenges facing the 2020 Census are significant, and Secretary Ross now projects a notably lower self-response rate (55%) than the Census Bureau originally estimated. Therefore, we believe the Census Bureau also should plan for an expanded field infrastructure, to conduct efficient but thorough door-to-door visits to unresponsive households. We urge you to seek cost information for an additional 52 Area Census Offices and to allocate sufficient funds to plan for that infrastructure expansion in FY 2018, as well. An accurate count of all Americans is a constitutionally required activity, and we believe Congress should commit to an adequate investment in the decennial census.

Sincerely,


BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senator


DIANNE FEINSTEIN
United States Senator


JACK REED
United States Senator


CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senator



PATTY MURRAY
United States Senator



RICHARD J. DURBIN
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JEFFREY A. MERKLEY
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TAMMY DUCKWORTH
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ROBERT P. CASEY, JR.
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SHERROD BROWN
United States Senator



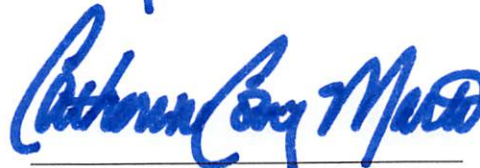
RON WYDEN
United States Senator



ELIZABETH WARREN
United States Senator



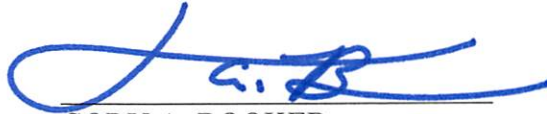
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