

Statement of Senator Thomas R. Carper, Chairman

**Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information,
Federal Services, and International Security**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“Preparing for 2010: Is the Census Bureau Ready for the Job Ahead?”

July 17, 2007

The subcommittee will come to order.

My thanks to our guests and witnesses for being here today. This hearing marks what I hope will be just the beginning of our efforts to exercise effective oversight over the Census Bureau’s preparations for the 2010 census.

My thanks as well to our ranking member for his commitment to this oversight work and for making it clear that the arrival of the latest decennial census does not mean that American taxpayers should write out a blank check.

I agree with Dr. Coburn on that score.

The requirement that the federal government conduct a census every ten years is enshrined in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution. It’s something that we have to do and that we have to do right.

Innumerable programs at all levels of government depend on an accurate census, as does the work. The make up of the U.S. House of Representatives also depends on its outcome. So I would count myself among those who would tell the Census Bureau to do what they need to do to get it right.

But getting it right should not be an excuse to break the bank.

According to data provided by the Census Bureau and listed on the chart we have on display, the first census in 1790 cost taxpayers about a penny per capita. For 2010, however, with the cost of the 2010 census projected at more than \$11 billion, the per capita cost of conducting the count will surge to \$36.

I will grant that counting every man, woman, and child in the country is a bigger and more complicated task in 2010 than it was in 1790 – or in 2000 or 1990 even. But with the advances in technology we’ve had over that time, I don’t understand why the price tag for the 2010 count is so high.

I’m also concerned that that price tag could go higher at the end of the day. Perhaps significantly higher.

The cost of the 2010 census is now projected at around \$11.5 billion. GAO has said, however, that this number may be based on outdated projections that don't take into account the results of testing that is currently ongoing.

I'm also concerned that the handheld computers that census-takers will be using to count those households that don't return their census forms right away have not always worked as well as expected. These computers are a big part of the Census Bureau's projected cost savings this time around. If they don't work or don't work as well as they should, I can see us spending more money than we planned between now and 2010 on staff, paper, and office space.

Finally, we will hear from GAO today that some key systems that the Census Bureau will be heavily relying in the coming years are not being tested now during the so-called "dress rehearsal" that is traditionally used to troubleshoot before the decennial census actually begins.

I mention all of this because it sounds a lot like what happened ten years ago. The cost of the 2000 census ultimately hit \$6.5 billion, 30 percent higher than originally projected, according to GAO. This increase was due in part to some of the same kind of problems we see today as the preparations for 2010 ramp up.

We need to work hard in the coming months to ensure that the mistakes and cost overruns of the past are not repeated this time around.