

Opening Statement of Chairman Carper

Nomination of John H. Thompson to be Director of the Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce July 9, 2013

As prepared for delivery:

We meet this morning to consider the nomination of John H. Thompson to be Director of the United States Census Bureau. The Census Bureau's mission is to serve as the leading source of quality data about the nation's people and economy. The Bureau does this by conducting numerous surveys every year which in turn provide lawmakers and citizens with a view of the nation's social and demographic makeup.

The most important and visible survey conducted by the Census Bureau is, of course, the decennial census. This once-a-decade undertaking is one of the few functions explicitly required under our constitution. Its execution is often described as the largest peace time mobilization in American history.

However, the Census Bureau also conducts other important surveys such as the American Community Survey which provides Federal, state, and local governments as well as the private sector with up to date information about the population within a certain geographic area. The collection of these data is important so that decisions such as how to distribute grant funding and where to build schools, hospitals, and retail stores are not made with data that is nearly a decade old.

Additionally, the Census Bureau collects the data that provides us with our monthly unemployment numbers. The Census Bureau's role in this area and in the federal government's efforts to effectively target initiatives aimed at growing our economy should not be overlooked.

The Census Bureau has been without a Senate-confirmed Director for nearly a year, when then-Director Bob Groves departed last August to be the Provost of Georgetown University. I am therefore very pleased that the President has nominated a qualified candidate to lead the Census Bureau for the next several years. I intend to work with my colleagues on this Committee to complete our review and to report the nomination for action by the full Senate as quickly as we can.

The nomination of John Thompson comes at a unique time during the decennial cycle. While most people only pay attention to the Census Bureau in the year or two leading up to the decennial census, it is these interim years in the middle of the decade when the critical research, testing, and planning phases are completed and the groundwork is laid for the actual count.

Last decade, there were many problems leading up to the 2010 Decennial Census. The roots of these problems were in poor planning and cost estimation. Most notably, the Census Bureau awarded a \$595 million contract for the development of half a million handheld computers.

These devices promised to reduce the time and cost of large operations such as address canvassing and non-response follow up.

However, the project experienced constant setbacks, including technical problems, escalating costs, and missed deadlines. Eventually, the decision was made in April 2008 to abandon use of the handheld computers for much of the 2010 Decennial Census and revert back to paper and pencil for the costly non-response follow up operation. This decision ended up adding \$2 billion to the cost of the 2010 Census, which in total cost taxpayers nearly \$13 billion, the costliest enumeration in our nation's history and twice the cost of the 2000 Decennial Census.

I do not want to rehash the details of the handheld contract or other problems in the years and months prior to the 2010 Decennial Census, but I do want to call on the lessons learned during that experience as this committee conducts oversight of the Census Bureau as we head into the 2020 Decennial Census.

As I will mention in greater detail during the question and answer session, for each decennial census the Census Bureau has invested exponentially more resources to ensure quality results. The cost of conducting the census has, on average, doubled since 1970. If that growth continues, the estimate for the 2020 Census would exceed \$25 billion. At a time when agencies across the Federal government have been asked to do more with less, a \$25 billion decennial census is unacceptable. If you are confirmed, Mr. Thompson, this committee will look to you to develop and implement initiatives to control costs while maintaining the quality and accuracy of the decennial count.

Another issue leading to the 2010 Decennial Census I want to address is the seven-month leadership vacuum the Bureau struggles through in 2009. Less than one year before Census Day and facing a number of challenges, the Census Bureau was without a Senate-confirmed Director. While the nomination and confirmation process was part of the reason for this lengthy vacancy, the main issue was the 2008 election and the transition from the Bush Administration to the Obama Administration, which created the vacancy at the beginning of 2009. An election in a year ending in '8' can lead to a months-long vacancy at a critical time for the Census Bureau.

To address that problem, I introduced legislation to create five year terms for the Census Director. The first term started January 2012 and future terms would begin in January of years ending in '7' and '2' so that a Director would be in place for the beginning of either the planning phase of a decennial census or the operational phase. This provision was adopted in legislation moving through Congress in 2012 and was signed into law last year.

Mr. Thompson, you are the first person to be nominated under this new law. If confirmed, you would fill out the term ending December 31, 2016 and be eligible to be nominated for an additional two full terms. Additionally, the provision that was signed into law also sets forth several qualifications for future Census Director nominees. The law now requires that nominees to be Census Director have a demonstrated ability in managing large organizations and experience in the collection, analysis, and use of statistical data. I am pleased that the President has nominated someone who meets these requirements.

If confirmed, Mr. Thompson returns to the Census Bureau where he spent 27 years holding various positions, including Associate Director for the Decennial Census and Chief of the Decennial Management Division. In 2000, Mr. Thompson was the senior career employee responsible for all aspects of that year's decennial census. In 2002, he left the Census Bureau and moved to Chicago to be the Executive Vice President of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. He performed the duties of that job so well that, in 2008, he was elevated to be President of that organization.

I am pleased that he has agreed to leave Chicago and return to Washington D.C. to lead the Census Bureau into the next decennial census. I look forward to Mr. Thompson's testimony today and the opportunity to discuss with him his priorities for the Census Bureau.