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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

CHRISTOPHER R. HIXON, STAFF DIRECTOR
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September 21, 2018

The Honorable Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

Dear Senator Harris:

Thank you for your letter regarding the 2020 Census. I share many of the concerns you raised, and have had those concerns for quite some time. Hearings can certainly be an effective and appropriate venue for highlighting issues, but they are not the only way our Committee conducts oversight. As you are aware, on April 10, 2018 we held a roundtable for Committee members with the Department of Commerce and the Census Bureau regarding the 2020 Census content, including the addition of a citizenship question to the 2020 questionnaire.

I understand the citizenship question is a controversial issue, and reasonable people can come to different conclusions. At the roundtable, Acting Census Director Ron Jarmin stated that there was no definitive evidence that the addition of a citizenship question would significantly reduce response rates, and that other questions (such as household income) had proven to have a greater impact on response rates for the American Community Survey.

In September 2017, Ranking Member McCaskill and I met with Secretary Ross to discuss the updated lifecycle costs for the 2020 Census. I remain highly concerned about the rising cost per household of the Census in the digital age, and the inability of the Census Bureau to effectively use technology to reduce cost and increase accuracy.

However, in August 2018, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report that found that Secretary Ross' updated lifecycle costs made "significant progress" over the lifecycle costs issued under the previous administration.¹ Another August 2018 GAO report found that the Census Bureau has made significant progress in developing and testing information technology (IT) systems for the 2020 Census, though the GAO highlighted several points of remaining concern.² Both of these reports indicate that while current Census Bureau and Department of Commerce leadership are improving the 2020 Census preparations, they inherited a program from the previous administration that was wrought with challenges.


¹ Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-18-635, 2020 Census: Census Bureau Improved the Quality of Its Cost Estimation but Additional Steps Are Needed to Ensure Reliability (2018), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/693990.pdf>.

² Gov't Accountability Office, GAO-18-655, 2020 Census: Continued Management Attention Needed to Address Challenges and Risks with Developing, Testing, and Securing IT Systems (2018), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/694169.pdf>.

During my chairmanship, the Committee has sent multiple oversight letters to Secretary Ross and Dr. Jarmin on the challenges they inherited. These issues include the awarding of critical communications contracts to partisan political organizations,³ the fraud threat inherent in Internet response plans,⁴ and the risk of inaccurate data when using administrative records to enumerate.⁵ Additionally, Committee majority and minority staff has been engaged in on going briefings with the GAO, Census Bureau, other relevant federal agencies, and non-government stakeholders on the status of 2020 Census preparations. Specifically, since April 2018, GAO has briefed Committee staff four times and the Census Bureau has briefed staff five times.⁶ On May 18 2018, bipartisan Committee staff travelled to Rhode Island to oversee Non-Response Follow Up operations for the 2018 End-to-End Test.

On October 3, 2018, the Committee will hold a hearing to consider the nomination of Steven Dillingham to serve as Census Bureau Director. Last year, I sent a letter with Senators McCaskill, Thune, and Nelson to President Trump asking that he nominate a Census Bureau Director.⁷ Considering the nomination of the Census Bureau Director is presently the most important step this Committee can take to put the 2020 Census on the path for success and I hope you will join me in considering Dr. Dillingham's nomination at the hearing.

Following that hearing we can assess the best way the Committee can continue to conduct oversight over the 2020 Census.

Sincerely

Ron Johnson
Chairman

³ Letter from Ron Johnson, Chairman, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. and Governmental Affairs, to Wilbur L. Ross, Sec'y, U.S. Dep't of Commerce (Jun. 5, 2017).

⁴ Letter from Ron Johnson, Chairman, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. and Governmental Affairs, and Trey Gowdy, Chairman, H. Comm. on Oversight and Gov't Reform, to Ron Jarmin, Acting Director, U.S. Census Bureau (Nov. 17, 2017).

⁵ Letter from Ron Johnson, Chairman, S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. and Governmental Affairs, to Ron Jarmin, Acting Director, U.S. Census Bureau (Sep. 25, 2017).

⁶ GAO briefings held on Apr. 9, May 23, Jun. 27, and Jul. 9; Census briefings held on Jun. 11, Aug. 2, Aug. 27, and Aug. 28 (2).

⁷ Letter from Senators Ron Johnson, Claire McCaskill, John Thune, and Bill Nelson to President Donald J. Trump (Jun. 28, 2017).