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Before the

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"Reviewing the 2022 Census: Local Perspectives in Michigan"

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Chairman Peters, and distinguished members and staff of the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, it is my honor to address this Committee on behalf of ACCESS, the nation's largest service provider to Middle Eastern and North African, or MENA, communities. ACCESS provides direct services to over 80,000 low-income and high-need clients across the southeast Michigan area on an annual basis, many of whom are immigrants and refugees. ACCESS also provides culturally and linguistically appropriate services to individuals of MENA descent, who tend to have limited English proficiency, limited access to capital, and barriers to established pathways to sustained and intergenerational academic and professional achievement.

For the MENA community, and the entire country writ large, the successful execution of the decennial Census is one of the most important activities that the United States government supports. The decennial census produces the fundamental understanding for legislators, policymakers, and community advocates of who lives in our country, what they need, where they are, and what they are going through.

In this context, the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee serves a critical function. This Committee provides oversight over the Census Bureau in its preparation for and execution of the decennial census. Input from community-based organizations is a vital part of the preparation of the oversight process. Community-based organizations are the connective tissue between policymakers, agency officials, and the individuals who have the most to lose or gain from an unsuccessful or otherwise inadequate enumeration of the decennial census. Ultimately, it is citizens, families, and communities, who seek representation in the Census data.

This was the case for the MENA community, who fought for formal recognition by the Census Bureau in a long and rigorous process that began in 2012, when the Commerce Secretary re-chartered the National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations.[1] In May of 2015, the Census Bureau convened community representatives and technical experts around the question of how best to test, assess, and implement a response category for MENA self-identification.[2] After reviewing the findings from the 2015 National Content Test, the Census Bureau issued a formal recommendation to the Office of Management and Budget, whose Federal standards ultimately determine the Census categories. The Census Bureau wrote that "it is optimal to use a dedicated "Middle Eastern or North African" response category."[3]

At that point, ACCESS, the National Network for Arab American Communities, and our many allies and advocacy partners awaited the news of MENA community inclusion. However, before the OMB could ultimately consider the Census Bureau's recommendation, the Trump

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[1] https://www.census.gov/about/cac/nac.html
[2] https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2015/demo/2015-MENA-Experts.html
[3] Department of Commerce. (2017, February). *2015 National Content Test: Race and Ethnicity Analysis Report.* Census Bureau & Economics and Statistics Administration: p. xiii. https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2015nct-race-ethnicity-analysis.pdf

administration's Department of Commerce decided to undermine and ignore the Census Bureau's official recommendation. As a result, individuals from the MENA region were misrecognized on the decennial Census and continue to be misunderstood, understudied, and effectively excluded from the policy making process.

In this sense, the MENA community stands in a similar place now relative to 2012. Except for two crucial differences. One, a MENA response category has already been researched, tested, and formally recommended. Two, and perhaps most importantly: the administration with the authority to establish a MENA category favors the mission of the Census Bureau to develop a complete and accurate portrayal of our national diversity.

As a candidate for President, Joe Biden issued a "Plan for Partnership" with "the Arab American Community."[4] In this plan, then-Candidate Biden pledged to "support the creation of a new Middle East North Africa (MENA) category," and cited the research of the MENA category conducted as part of the Census Bureau's 2015 National Content Test. Since taking office, President Biden has reaffirmed his commitment to racial and ethnic equity through Executive action.

In turn, Congress, and the people of this great nation, have supported several trailblazing advocacy efforts to help distinguish the MENA community on federal forms.

In February of 2022, Senator Peters (D-MI) introduced legislation, that would identify MENA communities as "underserved" to effectively distribute disaster response, resilience, and recovery funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.[5] On Tuesday, April 26th, you also sent a letter as the Chairman of HSGAC to the OMB requesting that they prioritize the establishment of a MENA category across all Federal forms as part of their process of revising the Federal standards for data on race and ethnicity.[6] That same day, the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC), a national institution of ACCESS, worked with the offices of Representative Rashida Tlaib, Anna Eshoo, Debbie Dingell, and Robin Kelly to introduce H.R. 7591, the "Health Equity and MENA Community Inclusion Act," which would authorize additional funds to HHS for equitable inclusion of the MENA community in federal programs that address minority health concerns and health disparities.[7]

Then, on Tuesday, June 14th, just one day before the OMB announced that they were initiating the process of revising the Federal race and ethnicity standards, NNAAC worked with the House

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[4] https://joebiden.com/joe-biden-and-the-arab-american-community-a-plan-for-partnership/
[5] S.3502 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Achieving Equity in Disaster Response, Recovery, and Resilience Act of 2022. (2022, February 2). http://www.congress.gov/.
[6] http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/majority-media/peters-urges-omb-to-include-middle-east-north-africa-category-in-federal-standards-for-gathering-data-on-race-and-ethnicity
[7] H.R.7591 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Health Equity and MENA Community Inclusion Act of 2022. (2022, April 26). http://www.congress.gov/.

Committee on Oversight and Reform to send a letter to the OMB requesting that they establish a MENA category in the Federal standards for data on race and ethnicity.

These actions underscore how, despite the unprecedented politicization of the Census Bureau's statistical function, significant popular support persists for MENA inclusion.

More is required than just MENA inclusion to protect the vital statistical function of the Census Bureau. Without statistical representation, communities are neither heard from nor properly addressed, while the important job of political representation suffers from critical gaps in knowledge and situational awareness. As we prepare for the 2030 Census, we must reflect and draw out vital lessons learned from the preparation for and execution of the 2020 Census, which suffered from an unprecedented pandemic, a systematic politicization of statistical functions, and communication breakdowns between government and civil society.

Among these learned lessons include the importance of maintaining adequate funding levels for research operations, field personnel, digital infrastructure, and data security.

Regarding their research operations, the Census Bureau conducted less field tests in high-minority and rural communities in 2020 relative to 2010. They also replaced plans to conduct a "dress rehearsal" in three diverse sites with plans to conduct a single "End to End" test in one urban site. Regarding field personnel, Congressional appropriators requested staffing levels equal to that authorized for FY2009, despite previously articulated plans to add 1,500 partnership specialists by 2019. Enumeration of the decennial Census also suffered from the Trump administration's placement of undue restrictions on who can be hired as enumerators. Whereas green card holders were permitted to be considered as enumerators in 2010, they were not in 2020. Moreover, the Census Bureau ran background checks differently, and with more rigorous conditions in the lead-up to the 2020 Census. For marginalized communities, data security is a critical factor in securing buy-in and improving response rates among marginalized communities. Still, many of the Census Bureau's cybersecurity-related tests were either delayed or postponed. As they consider preparation for the 2030 Census, the Census Bureau must prioritize robustness of their research operations, diversity in their field personnel, accessibility and intelligibility in their digital infrastructure, and trust in their efforts to ensure and promulgate data security.

Also included are lessons concerning the value of preparing community-based organizations to effectively communicate the data integrity and security of the Census operations. Although the Census Bureau built an impressive survey response infrastructure comprising smart phones, computers, land phones, paper forms and other devices, the Bureau's communication strategy came short of adequately informing the public about these options and how to utilize them. The Bureau also failed in adding functionality such as additional language support to some of its survey response infrastructure and of notifying community, particularly the immigrant community, of the availability of 12 non-English language support centers or the availability of Census forms in their native language, including Arabic. As a result of these deficiencies, ACCESS became aware of various reports of community members not understanding the purpose of the test and discarding Census materials received in the mail.

HSGAC must ensure that the Census once again becomes a scientific agency true to its mission: to collect the data that most accurately represents the reality of life in this country. Most importantly, to develop a complete and accurate account of everyone who resides in the United States. This includes the establishment of a MENA category, the production of more accessible data products, complete with state and metropolitan-level data on basic demographics, and prioritization of the aforementioned changes to the Census Bureau's research and field operations, communications strategy, and data security practices.

I look forward to the work of preparing for a 2030 Census that stays true to the vital statistical function of the decennial Census.