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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6025

<http://appropriations.senate.gov>

August 4, 2020

The Honorable Stephen Dillingham
Director
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Director Dillingham:

I write to express my deep concern regarding the expedited schedule for the 2020 Decennial Census that puts the success of the Constitutionally-mandated count at risk. On August 3, 2020, you announced that data collection operations will be reduced by a month and data processing operations will be compressed by several months in order to allow the Secretary of Commerce to transmit the apportionment counts to the president by December 31, 2020.¹ This announcement comes after it was previously reported that senior White House and Department of Commerce officials are trying to rush the execution of the 2020 Decennial Census for perceived political gain.² This is unacceptable.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on April 13, 2020, you and Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross released a joint statement announcing that the Bureau of the Census (Census Bureau) was delaying field operations by three months. At the same time, you requested a fourth-month delay in the statutory deadlines for reporting apportionment and restricting counts, stating:

“In order to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau is seeking statutory relief from Congress of 120 additional calendar days to deliver final apportionment counts. Under this plan, the Census Bureau would extend the window for field data collection and self-response to October 31, 2020, which will allow for apportionment counts to be delivered to the President by April 30, 2021, and redistricting data to be delivered to the states no later than July 31, 2021.”³

You have expressed to me on several occasions a desire to allow career Census Bureau experts to carry out the critical agency mission absent political meddling—most recently, in

¹ “Statement from U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham: Delivering a Complete and Accurate 2020 Census Count,” U.S. Census Bureau, 3 August 2020, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/delivering-complete-accurate-count.html>.

² Wines, M. (2020, July 28). New Census Worry: A Rushed Count Could Mean a Botched One. *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/us/trump-census.html>

³ “U.S. Department of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and U.S. Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham Statement on 2020 Census Operational Adjustments Due to COVID-19,” U.S. Census Bureau, 13 April 2020, <https://2020census.gov/en/news-events/press-releases/statement-covid-19-2020>.

response to a letter Chairman Jerry Moran and I sent you on July 2, 2020, regarding the importance of executing a complete and accurate 2020 Decennial Census, free from political interference. In your response, dated, July, 10, 2020, you asserted:

“The leadership and staff of the Census Bureau are fully committed to a complete and accurate count of all people living in the United States, without exception...I want to be clear that the 2020 Census is nonpartisan in its operation and support, whether during data collection from self-response and field work or the complicated and important work during post-enumeration processing.”

However, I’m seriously concerned that in a mere matter of weeks this is no longer the case. On August 3, 2020, you announced that: “We will end field data collection by September 30, 2020,” a month earlier than the plan you announced in April 2020. I find it impossible to believe that this decision was based on the best recommendations of career Census Bureau experts. Census data collection operations are incredibly complicated even in the best of conditions, but their complexity is greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, Census experts believe that the results of accelerating the data collection operations under current conditions could be disastrous, with a career official stating, “It’s going to be impossible to complete the count in time. I’m very fearful we’re going to have a massive undercount.”⁴

Further, in response to a question during a House Committee on Oversight and Reform hearing on July 29, 2020, you contested the expert opinions of Census career staff regarding the need for a delay of statutory requirements. Tim Olson, director of field operations for the 2020 Decennial, stated back in May 2020 that, “We have passed the point where we could even meet the current legislative requirement of Dec. 31...We can’t do that anymore.”⁵ But, when this issue was raised at the hearing, you disagreed, stating: “I can’t agree with him, we have many more assessments ahead of us here.”

The expedited 2020 Decennial Census schedule, along with the Presidential Memorandum issued on July 21, 2020, excluding undocumented immigrants from the apportionment count, has heightened concerns that the Trump Administration is trying to manipulate the 2020 Decennial Census for political gain. As such, I would like a formal response, in writing, to the following questions regarding the Census’s operational plans for the 2020 Decennial Census. I request a response by August 14, 2020.

1. Is the Census Bureau still requesting a four-month statutory extension of the apportionment and restricting deadlines? If not, what has changed with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic that no longer make these statutory changes necessary?
2. What has changed with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic that allows the Bureau to thoroughly complete the nonresponse followup and self-response operations in

⁴ Hansi, L.W. (2020, July 30). Census Door Knocking Cut A Month Short Amid Pressure To Finish Count. *National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/30/896656747/when-does-census-counting-end-bureau-sends-alarming-mixed-signals>

⁵ Hansi, L.W. (2020, May 27). 'We're Running Out Of Time': Census Turns To Congress To Push Deadlines. *National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/27/863290458/we-running-out-of-time-census-turns-to-congress-to-push-deadlines>

a compressed timeframe from October 31, 2020, to September 30, 2020? Do career employees agree with this change?

3. Since the nonresponse followup operations will be cut short by a month, will the Census Bureau have to reduce the number of times enumerators approach each household? Will use of administrative records to enumerate unresponsive households increase? Will imputation of data increase, and how much use of imputation is acceptable, especially for “whole households” from which the Bureau could not collect data directly?
4. Is the Census Bureau requesting additional resources to rush data collection operations? What evidence do you have that additional funding will allow the Bureau to complete nonresponse follow-up, as well as operations to count special populations, such as people experiencing homelessness, in a thorough manner, given the unpredictability of coronavirus surges and natural disasters, as well as difficulty the Bureau already has encountered in retaining qualified enumerators and field supervisors?
5. How would a compressed schedule affect vital quality-check activities for the nonresponse followup and self-response operations? Will the Census Bureau still carry out the full re-interview operation as laid out in the detailed operational plan for nonresponse followup? If not, why not, and what will the effect be on the quality of census data?
6. The original schedule included five months to complete data processing and tabulation. How long will these operations last under the new schedule and how will these operations change with the compressed schedule? Will the Bureau still conduct the Count Review program, and if so, how will the schedule for that operation compare to the original timetable?

It is not a lack of resources hampering the data collection process. As the Vice Chair of the Senate Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, I have worked you and with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure that the Census Bureau has the resources needed to execute a complete and accurate 2020 Decennial Census. This includes appropriating a \$2 billion contingency reserve that was recommended by Secretary Ross but never requested in the budget. This amount has proven critical, as the Census Bureau required about \$1.5 billion thus far to respond to the COVID-19 impacts, including hiring additional nonresponse followup enumerators.

As I have said throughout this process, it is imperative that the Census counts every person in the United States, where they live. We only have one chance to get this right. I am deeply concerned about the recent announcement. I expect that as the Census Director, you will uphold a complete and accurate count, free of political meddling. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
Vice Chair
Subcommittee on Commerce,
Justice, Science and Related Agencies