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Prolonged Federal Shutdown Could Affect Census

HARRISBURG (Jan. 17, 2019) – The nonpartisan coalition Keystone Counts today warned that a prolonged federal government shutdown could upend years of careful, costly research, testing, and preparation by the U.S. Census Bureau and hinder a fair and accurate count needed to determine billions in federal aid to states and legislative representation nationwide.

“The census isn’t something that simply happens every 10 years. It’s something that takes nine years to plan and execute,” said Erin Casey, executive director Keystone Counts. “The shutdown could not come at a worse time for the U.S. Census Bureau.”

So far, preparations for Census 2020 continue with forward funding ($1.056 billion) from the 2018 federal fiscal year appropriations bill. However, if it continues into February, the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights estimates the Census Bureau will run out of money to continue the preparations. What money the U.S. Census Bureaus has, it is spending conservatively, meaning it is likely pushing back some activities that are less time sensitive but no less important.

Additionally, surveys that are paid for by other federal agencies that have enacted appropriations bills for the 2019 fiscal year will continue. That includes the basic part of the Current Population Survey, conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics on a reimbursable basis. The Survey of Income and Program Participation is suspended, however, as is the American Community Survey.

“Already, some programs are being affected,” Casey said. “The longer the shutdown drags out, the worse it is, and the harder and harder it becomes to catch up down the road, especially when you’re talking about the staff that need to be hired, millions of materials that need to be developed, printed, shipped, and received, let alone organizing field teams.”

Even before the shutdown, there was considerable concern about the 2020 census.

In March 2017, the U.S. Commerce Department announced it decided to include a new controversial question about citizenship status in the 2020 U.S. Census, despite bipartisan opposition to adding it in at the last minute.
Earlier this week, Judge Jesse Furman of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York ruled that the bureau’s decision to add the question was unlawful. His ruling blocks the administration from adding the question to the Census questionnaire. The New York case is one of many before the courts calling into question the addition of the citizenship question. Observers expect the issue to end up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Experts are unsure how households --- whether native or foreign-born, citizen or noncitizen --- will respond to a question asking about confidential personal information because of their concerns about how government authorities may use that information.

Undercounting communities can lead to a decade of headaches and missed funding.

The census not only ensures fair political representation but also determines the appropriation of more than $589.7 billion in federal funds to states each year --- $26.7 billion of which comes to Pennsylvania each year.

An inaccurate count could cost the Commonwealth hundreds of millions of dollars, deny communities of their fair share for any number of federally backed programs, and affect legislative representation for the next decade.

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Keystone Counts is a nonpartisan coalition of advocacy groups, service providers, and community organizations joined together to build an education and outreach effort for a fair and accurate 2020 census. For more information, visit www.KeystoneCounts.org.