Tribes and the Census

Administration Asking Congress for $187 Million More for 2020 Census, But Is It Enough?

The Administration has finally admitted that its requested budget for the 2020 Census falls short of what's needed to conduct an accurate count of the American population. Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, in whose Department the Census Bureau is located, told a Committee of the House of Representatives yesterday that the Bureau needs $187 million more than what was previously requested for this Fiscal Year.

The Secretary, along with other witnesses, testified yesterday before the House Oversight Committee on the looming crisis facing the next Census if steps are not taken now to provide more money for it. The Secretary said that he is currently working with the Congressional Appropriations Committees to obtain the additional money.

The Congress has underfunded the planning for the 2020 national headcount for years. In the years leading up to the 1990, 2000 and 2010 Censuses, Congress ramped up funding to support the vastly increased amount of activity preceding every decennial enumeration. Far from substantially increasing the money to cover planning and testing for the coming decennial, the Administration called for flatlining the Bureau's budget in Fiscal Year 2018.

To some on Capitol Hill and among the national organizations supporting an accurate count of Native Americans and other communities of color, the $187 million being requested is not enough to make up for the past budget shortfalls. Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney from New York, long a champion of adequate support for Census operations, introduced a bill on Wednesday that would add $384 million to the Administration's original request, over twice the amount of additional funding that Secretary Ross is seeking.

Tribes and organizations serving off-reservation Native populations have already felt the effect of shortchanging the Census budget. The two test runs of Census operations in reservation communities scheduled for this past spring were both cancelled. This will make the 2020 Census the first in decades when no testing has been done in a reservation area.

The 2020 outreach and promotion campaign is far behind schedule. It includes the various "partnership" programs, including the Tribal Partnership Program that has proven valuable in the past two decennials in improving the count in reservation areas. According to press accounts, only 40 new partnership specialists have been hired by the
Bureau to date when many more are needed, not only to help tribes promote participation in the Census, but off-reservation organizations as well.

Congress will have to act quickly on the Secretary's request for additional funding for FY 2018. The full House of Representatives has already passed an omnibus appropriations bill containing the money for the "Periodic Censuses and Programs" account that covers the decennial census (and the ACS) at the original Administration request level of $1.251 billion. The Senate has yet to act, but its Appropriations Committee recommended the same level back in late July. The continuing resolution currently keeping the federal government going is scheduled to expire December 8th.

In his testimony before the House Oversight Committee yesterday, Secretary Ross was quick to point out that he has a very personal interest in the Census. As a student in his early days, he served as a Census enumerator himself.

After being confirmed as the new Secretary of Commerce, he led a review of the Census Bureau's previous projections of the "life cycle" cost of the 2020 Census. That is the estimate of the total costs likely to be incurred over the more than ten years it takes to plan and conduct a decennial census and to tabulate and disseminate the results. The original estimate, prepared during the previous Administration, was roughly $12.3 billion. Upon a thorough review, the current Administration increased that figure to $15.6 billion. The request for $187 million in added funds covers just FY 2018.

It's now up to the Congress to act on final funding for the Census Bureau for the Fiscal Year that has already begun. Even if it provides the $187 million increase that the Secretary has just recommended above the $1.251 billion already approved in the House and supported by the Senate appropriators, it will still leave the major burden of insuring an accurate count of the American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian populations in the hands of tribes and Native organizations.

**Still No Census Bureau Director**

The position of the Director of the Census Bureau has been vacant since the end of June. In his Congressional testimony yesterday, Secretary Ross said that active efforts are underway to find a new head of the Bureau. He mentioned that one person considered for the position had failed the "vetting process" that any nominee must go through to determine his or her suitability for the post. The Secretary didn't say who that person was.

*Norm DeWeaver norm_deweaver@rocketmail.com October 13, 2017
Redistribution of this information is encouraged.*