Administation Budget Request Would Eviscerate Funding for the 2020 Census

The Administration submitted its budget request for Fiscal Year 2018 to the Congress on Tuesday. As expected, it was bad news in terms of the funding the Administration wants to conduct a variety of vital operations next year leading into the 2020 Census.

While the Congress is expected to make major changes from the requested levels in providing money for the coming year, the repercussions could still jeopardize the 2020 count for American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

The funding level being sought by the Administration for the 2020 decennial is shown in the budgetary fine print as a little over $1 billion. Although this sounds like a lot of money, it isn't nearly what experts on Census operations consider as essential to "ramp up" preparations for the coming national population headcount.

It is customary when a new decennial census is only two years away to provide the Census Bureau with a huge increase in its funding from the year before. In comparable periods before previous censuses, the funding has jumped by hundreds of millions of dollars. Not this time if the Administration has its way.

"The Census Project," a broad-based network of business, professional and civil rights groups that advocates on Census Bureau issues, used the illustration on the next page in its latest blog to illustrate the budget situation. The blog concluded with this warning:

"If President Trump's budget is enacted, the nation could be facing an historic census disaster. It's up to Congress to save the 2020 Census!"

The detailed work on the FY 2018 budget request will be handled by the House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees that draft the funding bill for the Departments of Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies. The upcoming hearings in both Subcommittees will provide more in-depth information on what the Administration has in mind and what the Subcommittee members may consider to be necessary.

As previously described in this newsletter, Indian Country has a lot at stake in the outcome. The two test censuses that were to check out plans for the upcoming census on the ground in reservation areas in 2017, one at Standing Rock and one at Colville, were both scratched because of Census Bureau concerns over funding shortfalls.
Outreach and promotion activities, the Tribal Liaison Program and the staffing of Census field offices could all be in jeopardy unless Congress provides the kind of "ramp up" funding for the decennial census that it has in the past.

Press accounts on the Administration's budget request for FY 2018 have stressed the real potential for more adequate funding for many programs in the appropriations bills that emerge from the Congress. That may not be the full story, however. The members of the majority party in both houses may be inclined to at least partially adopt some of the Administration's priorities. Should that happen, it could still result in less than needed funding for many programs, including Census Bureau programs.

Graph courtesy of The Census Project

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