June 21, 2016

FY 2017 Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations Bill:
Oppose Amendments To Reduce Funding for Census Bureau;
Oppose Any Rider to Make American Community Survey Voluntary

Dear Senator:

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States, we urge you to oppose any amendments to the FY 2017 Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations bill (S. 2837) that would further reduce funding for the U.S. Census Bureau to pay for other programs. We also urge you to reject any proposals to convert the American Community Survey (ACS) from a mandatory to a voluntary survey or to eliminate the survey altogether.

The Leadership Conference considers a fair and accurate census and comprehensive ACS among the most significant civil rights issues facing the country today. Census data ensure fair, proportionate voting representation for all Americans. Federal funding for key programs, such as education, health care, and rural broadband access, is determined by census data. Further, census data assist federal agencies, like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, in monitoring discrimination.

S.2837’s allocation of $1.52 billion to the Census Bureau (a cut of $115 million from the Census Bureau’s budget request) represents the minimum level of funding necessary to keep 2020 Census planning and preparations on track and to preserve a robust ACS.

Any further cuts to the Census Bureau’s budget request will significantly affect planning for the 2020 Census at a critical point in the decennial cycle. At stake are sweeping reforms the Census Bureau is pursuing to modernize the census process and reduce the lifecycle cost of the census by $5 billion, while maintaining accuracy and quality. In FY 2017, the Census Bureau must begin to finish production of all IT systems and the operational infrastructure for the 2020 Census in time for an end-to-end readiness test in 2018; develop a vast communications campaign that can navigate a fragmented media landscape; test new enumeration methods in rural areas and on Tribal lands; and finalize the content of the questionnaire in order to meet legal deadlines.
Without adequate funding, the Census could be forced to abandon some or all of its cost-saving initiatives — including an Internet and smartphone response option, use of administrative records to reduce the cost of nonresponse follow-up, targeted pre-census address canvassing, and automated, streamlined field operations — and revert to outdated, costly methods used in 2010 and previous censuses. Additional reductions in Census Bureau funding could put a fair and accurate 2020 Census at significant risk. Further cuts could also undermine the ACS, should the Census Bureau be forced to reduce the ACS sample size or reduce the survey’s coverage.

We also oppose any amendments that would undermine a robust, mandatory ACS. The ACS, an ongoing part of the decennial census, provides irreplaceable, high-quality annual data on key social and economic characteristics for every community in the country. Census Bureau research and tests have demonstrated that making response to the ACS voluntary will lead to dramatically lower response rates, significantly higher costs (as much as $90 million per year more), and the loss of any reliable data for many hard-to-count populations and for smaller (less populous) geographic areas, including rural counties, small cities, towns, neighborhoods and American Indian reservations. We encourage you to consider that when Canada converted its mandatory census long form to a voluntary survey in 2011, response rates dropped by more than 25 percent, costs increased by $22 million, and Statistics Canada was unable to produce vital data for a quarter of the nation’s places — mostly small and rural areas. We urge you to reject any proposals to make response to the ACS voluntary.

Making further cuts to the FY 2017 budget request for the Census Bureau will undermine the agency’s ability to collect and publish data that are essential to running our government, informing our policies, and influencing economic productivity. Adequate funding for the 2020 Census and related ACS is a wise and necessary investment in the effective governance of our nation and preservation of our democratic ideals.

We urge you to reject any efforts to further reduce census funding or make the ACS voluntary. If you need further information or have any questions regarding this issue, please contact Corrine Yu, Leadership Conference Managing Policy Director at 202-466-5670.

Sincerely,

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