

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 14, 2017

The Honorable Wilbur L. Ross, Jr
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Ross:

We write to express our strong concern with the current state of the Census Bureau and the problems it is facing as it works to prepare for the 2020 decennial census. Lack of leadership, woeful underfunding, delayed testing of new technology, and new demographic challenges lead us to believe that significant action must be taken to get planning and preparation on track to ensure an accurate census count in 2020.

The impending departure of Census Bureau Director John H. Thompson leaves the Bureau without clear leadership as it begins its “ramp up” period in the 2 years before the kick off of the 2020 decennial census. As you know, Director Thompson has been serving in his role since 2013, during which time he has overseen much of the planning and preparation for a census that is expected to be the largest and most technologically advanced in U.S. history. A leadership void seriously threatens the timeline of preparation, which has already experienced countless delays and setbacks. We cannot emphasize enough the need for clear, decisive leadership at the Census Bureau during this critical time.

The 2020 decennial census planning and preparation effort has been chronically underfunded. Compared to past decennial censuses, the Census Bureau has never had to implement planning with so few resources. In November 2016, Census Bureau Director Thompson testified that enacted appropriation for decennial census planning and preparation was significantly less than requested between Fiscal Years 2013 to 2016. During this period, enacted levels fell short of requests by \$184.8 million. Compounding this issue are the continuing appropriations at reduced levels for the Census Bureau, which have forced the Bureau to make difficult decisions about the testing of new technologies ahead of 2020. Finally, President Trump’s request of \$1.5 billion for FY2018 reflects only a \$27 million increase over the FY2017 enacted level, an entirely inadequate number given the demands on the Bureau leading up to the census to ensure a successful execution.

The lack of adequate funding has forced the Census Bureau to delay its testing schedule for operations and new technology. Due to budgetary constraints, the Bureau cancelled the scheduled 2017 tests of field operations in Puerto Rico, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North and South Dakota, and the Colville Indian Reservation and off-reservation trust land in Washington. We understand that this field testing will now be incorporated into the already strained 2018 end-to-end test, placing even more pressure on what is supposed to be the final test for systems and operations, scheduled to begin later this year.

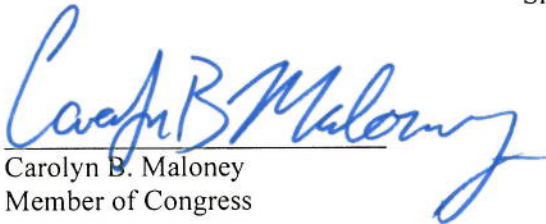
In addition to delayed testing, the Census Bureau is also facing difficulty developing the nearly 50 IT systems that 2020 census operations will require. As of October 2016, only 3 of these systems had been delivered leaving GAO to question whether the Bureau would be ready for the 2018 end-to-end test¹. The Census Bureau is facing increasingly complex socio-demographic challenges that threaten the Bureau’s ability to achieve a high-quality, cost-effective count of all US residents. Changes in the population profile between 1970 and 2015 underscore just

how difficult a task the 2020 decennial census will be. The population has swelled by 58.1% to over 321 million residents and the number of households that need to be enumerated has more than doubled since the 1970 decennial census.

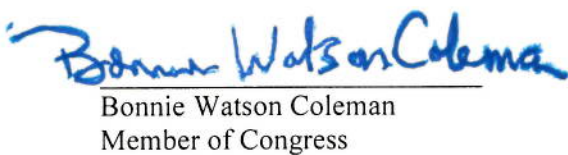
Furthermore, public trust in our Federal government is at an alarmingly low. One 2015 poll revealed that only 19% of the public trusts the federal government “just about always” or “most of the time”, compared to 54% of the population in 1970. These statistics pose a threat to census operations in the short term by threatening robust participation from skeptical citizens. A comprehensive, accurate, and well executed decennial census, however, will serve to improve trust in our federal institutions by demonstrating, to the American people, that their government can faithfully execute critical and constitutionally mandated functions.

The problems and challenges described in this letter have, once again, led the GAO to place the decennial census on its notorious “High Risk” list². We are concerned as to whether the planning and preparation cycle can correct itself and get back on track in time to conduct an accurate, cost-effective count with new, untested technology. We strongly urge you to quickly appoint new leadership and ensure that the Bureau has sufficient funds to fulfill its constitutional mandate and conduct a complete and accurate 2020 decennial census.

Sincerely,


Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress


Keith Ellison
Member of Congress

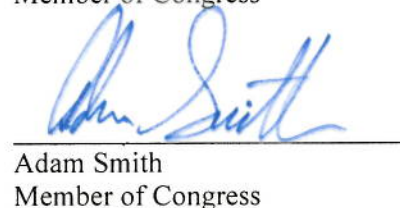

Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress


Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress


Joyce Beatty
Member of Congress


Filemon Vela
Member of Congress


Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress


Adam Smith
Member of Congress

Ted W. Lieu

Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky

Janice D. Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

Darren Soto

Darren Soto
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer

Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

Mark Pocan

Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

Anthony G. Brown

Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress

Jim Costa

Jim Costa
Member of Congress

James P. McGovern

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Ruben J. Kihuen

Ruben J. Kihuen
Member of Congress

Jimmy Gomez

Jimmy Gomez
Member of Congress

Betty McCollum

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

Jared Polis

Jared Polis
Member of Congress

Dwight Evans

Dwight Evans
Member of Congress

Vicente Gonzalez

Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress

Sheila Jackson Lee

Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress



Ro Khanna
Member of Congress



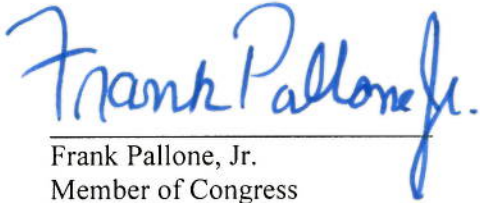
Danny K. Davis
Member of Congress



David E. Price
Member of Congress



Madeleine Z. Bordallo
Member of Congress



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Member of Congress



Richard M. Nolan
Member of Congress



Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

1. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Information Technology: Uncertainty Remains about the Bureau's Readiness for a Key Decennial Census Test*, GAO-17-221T, November 16, 2016, p. 11.

2. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *High-Risk Series: Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others*, GAO-17-317, February 2017, pp. 221-223.