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 test. 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” list. 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 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

Tulsi Gabbard
Member of Congress

Yvette D. Clarke
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Adam Smith
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Eleanor Holmes Norton  
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