

## **POLICY UPDATE: 2020 CENSUS APPROPRIATIONS**

*By Terri Ann Lowenthal  
Consultant, Funders Census Initiative*

After several fits and starts, Congress finalized (and the president signed into law) appropriations bills that fund the federal government for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, which started on October 1, 2019 (Public Law 116-93). The Census Bureau received \$7.56 billion, which includes \$6.7 billion in new funding for the 2020 Census.

The final appropriation mirrors the levels in the Senate-passed Commerce, Justice, and Science and Related Agencies bill (S. 2584, S. Rept. 116-127). The new funding is on top of roughly \$1 billion in money carried over from Fiscal Year 2019, bringing the total funding available for 2020 Census operations in line with the original FY 2020 stakeholder recommendation of \$7.5 billion (\$8.5 billion for the Census Bureau as a whole). While the Census Bureau could have spent that \$1 billion on any number of improvements to census preparations in FY 2019, it appears that the administration would not approve any spending above the president's budget request for that year, preferring instead to hold the money as a way to reduce the president's request for new funding in FY 2020. In fact, the president requested only \$5.3 billion in new funding for the 2020 Census for the current fiscal year, which would have given the bureau \$6.3 billion for census year operations. Instead, Congress essentially approved an additional \$1.4 billion, sending a clear signal to the administration that it expects more-robust outreach, promotion, and general level of effort to ensure a successful census.

In one of two temporary FY 2020 spending measures leading up to the final full-year bill, Congress also specifically included no less than \$90 million (as part of overall 2020 Census funding) for a "Mobile Questionnaire Assistance Center" (M-QAC) program. Stakeholders and congressional allies had pushed the Census Bureau to establish QACs as far back as 2018; the bureau drafted the outline of a new initiative last year but would not discuss specifics or start planning for this operation until Congress directly appropriated funds in FY 2020. We are awaiting details of how the M-QAC program will work; champions in Congress also have requested specifics from the bureau. We will share additional information with funders as soon as it is available.

The explanatory report accompanying the final appropriations "mini-bus" bill (an appropriations package covering more than one of the regular 12 annual appropriations bills) also directs the Census Bureau to expand "outreach and communications" efforts to at least the level implemented in the 2010 Census (adjusted for inflation). This has been a point of contention for two years, as stakeholders — with congressional support — have advocated for more Partnership Program staff and expanded targeted advertising and promotion, while the Commerce Department apparently would not let the bureau go beyond its original plan and cost estimate, creating what I call an "alternative narrative" on how the 2020 Census partnership and communications plan under the current administration was better than the 2010 Census version.

In summary, though, the Census Bureau's failure to heed previous congressional directives on enhanced census operations (to be clear, largely because the administration would not make additional resources available) is now water under the bridge. The contemporaneous challenge is to ensure that the Census Bureau can now expand, to the extent feasible, Partnership Program staff (whether Partner Specialists or Partnership Assistants, as in 2010), enumerator staffing levels, and

targeted advertising and outreach materials, especially (but not exclusively) to limited English proficient households. Congress must take the lead in overseeing expenditure of funds closely and in real time, to ensure that the administration does not continue to hold back resources that could be spent now to plan and implement more-robust operations for the remainder of this fiscal year, which ends September 30.