

FEBRUARY 24, 2000

SCHAKOWSKY DECLARES CENSUS EMERGENCY IN 9TH DISTRICT SENDS LETTER TO CENSUS DIRECTOR DEMANDING URGENT CHANGES

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) declared a census emergency in the 9th Congressional District. She expressed her concerns in a letter to the Census Bureau that her diverse district will be undercounted again, and as a result, lose millions of dollars for essential programs in education, healthcare, economic development and transportation.

In a letter to Dr. Kenneth Prewitt, Director of the Census Bureau, Schakowsky wrote, "I believe the Bureau is falling short of necessary goals in several areas, including (1) recruitment of census workers (2) maximizing the mail response and (3) overall management of the plan. I believe we are facing a serious census emergency in the 9th Congressional District that cannot wait to be addressed."

Schakowsky's letter to Dr. Prewitt is attached.

{} {attached}

February 23, 2000

Dr. Kenneth Prewitt
Director
Bureau of the Census
United States Department of Commerce
Washington, DC 20233-0001

Dear Dr. Prewitt:

I am writing to express my concern about the efforts of the Census Bureau to achieve an accurate count in my district, a diverse district that has been chronically undercounted in the past. Without an accurate count, my district will face significant funding losses in essential programs such as education, housing, economic development and healthcare. I believe the Bureau is falling short of necessary goals in several areas, including (1) recruitment of census workers (2) maximizing the mail response and (3) overall management of the plan. I believe we are facing a serious census emergency in the 9th Congressional District that cannot wait to be addressed.

(1) Recruitment of census workers: The General Accounting Office reported that the Chicago regional office of the Census Bureau was falling short of national goals for

recruitment of census workers. There is simply no excuse for that, and all my efforts to receive a reasonable explanation have failed. It is particularly mystifying since I am aware of scores of people who have taken the test and have never heard anything from the Bureau. I know that many community-based organizations, CBOs, have worked hard to recruit workers. For example, the Coalition for African, Asian and Latino Immigrants of Illinois (CAALII), recruited dozens of individuals for testing as far back as July. Most have yet to be contacted. At a February 22 meeting of forty CBOs that I convened, we were told that the individuals had to call the Census Bureau to find out if they passed the test, something never before communicated.

My office has been dispensing information about testing sites and times for the Chicago locations within my district. However, the Des Plaines office, which has jurisdiction over all suburbs in my district, has so far refused to share with me a schedule that I can disseminate to community groups and constituents. I want that information immediately.

One CBO staff person reported a Census Bureau recruitment flyer that referred prospective employees to a disconnected phone number.

(2) Maximizing the mail response: Two of the worst mail response areas or "hot tracts" are in my district in the neighborhoods of Uptown and Rogers Park. Until recently, my office was unable to obtain a "hot tracts" map. Local groups still do not have this information and are operating without any knowledge as to where the 1990 mail response rate was the lowest.

It has been very difficult to obtain timely, adequate and language appropriate materials. Members of complete count committees in my district have waited up to six months for some supplies. For example, Evanston Township High School requested 300 curriculum packets in July; after exhaustive efforts, the materials were received on February 18. Other schools still have not received the materials they requested, though the census forms will be mailed in less than three weeks.

My own office asked for posters to dispense at an important meeting with public officials from my district. The materials arrived one week after the meeting took place.

I requested a detailed timeline of census bureau activities and was told that the document was "internal" and that my office could not have a copy.

Within weeks, Questionnaire Assistance Centers, QACs, will be opened, aimed at helping people with the census form. These will be located exclusively in public schools and some libraries. Each will be staffed by an employee of the census bureau. None of those locations has yet been announced. Those that know the community best, the CBOs, have not been consulted, but worse, in my opinion, will not themselves be utilized as QACs. It is to the many ethnic and neighborhood organizations that our people go for advice and assistance. Yet none of the resources will go to assisting the very institutions that are working every day with their constituents to encourage them to mail

back the census form. I am skeptical that the QACs, as currently configured, will not have much of an impact on increasing the mail response.

At the beginning of March, a letter will be sent advising people that they can order a census form in one of five languages. We were told at our February 22 meeting that there was no plan to do any publicity about that mailing. I am concerned that, as a consequence, there will be a low response rate. I would like a report on the return rate from my district. A poor response rate could foreshadow a low response to the actual form.

When asked where blank census forms will be available, the answer was vague-some schools and libraries with none going to congressional offices and CBOs. This lack of certainty and availability is disturbing.

A concern was raised that the census form would be mishandled by the post office, since it has no name on it. We were told that there are efforts underway to assure that the post office puts a form in every box but that details have not yet been worked out. Can this be true?

Public officials and CBOs have not yet been told how the Census Bureau plans to communicate with foreign-language speakers about the location of the QACs.

March 28, we were told, is the census day for homeless people. The census bureau has developed a list of soup kitchens and shelters to which workers will go to fill out forms with homeless people. When an organization that serves the homeless asked for the list of sites, it was told that the list was not being released because "We don't want the media following us around and scaring people off." The request was based on a desire to assure that as many of the homeless as possible would be counted. The Bureau's response was completely inappropriate. I want that list.

I am very concerned that little attention has been paid to plan for the language barriers that the citizens of my district are facing. It would be helpful if the bureau would refer to the knowledge of the CBOs who have expertise in overcoming language barriers. In addition, questions have been raised about the placement of advertising in foreign language media outlets. I would like a breakdown of the media buys in the Chicago area.

(3) Management of the plan: I believe the Chicago office has a serious management problem. I believe the most serious problem is the failure to efficiently and effectively utilize community resources and to maximize the use of bureau staff time in a manner that directly impacts mail response to the census. We are well past the time to "turn up the heat" in the words of Stanley Moore, Regional Census Director. A sense of urgency is required now.

□

- In Chicago, and in my incredibly diverse district in particular, we have an infrastructure of community based organizations, many of them organized around

