



Mayor's Office of
Immigrant Affairs
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Commissioner

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Testimony of Commissioner Bitta Mostofi
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Immigration, and State and Federal Legislation:

“Oversight - Preparations for a Complete Count in the 2020 Census”

Thank you to Chair Cabrera, Chair Cohen, Chair Menchaca, and the members of the Committees. My name is Bitta Mostofi and I am the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today alongside my colleagues from across the administration, as we work together to ensure that every New Yorker is counted during the 2020 Census.

In this testimony I will briefly touch on the context of the Census work in this federal climate and highlight the partnership we have with Director Menin and NYC Census 2020 to reach immigrant New Yorkers with the message about the importance of a complete count.

Federal context

The Census, an enumeration enshrined in our constitution, is the instrument used to effectively denote resources and representation to our states and localities and for our communities. Through it, every person has a chance to be counted as a New Yorker, regardless of immigration status, or language, or any other demographic characteristic. Ultimately, this count will be used to plan for the future of our City and to receive our fair share of the taxes we pay and the representation we receive in Congress. As such, this count recognizes the power we wield as individuals and as members of the biggest city in the nation.

For that reason, the Trump Administration's attempts to undermine the accuracy of the Census count is concerning. Over the past few years, the federal government has deliberately attempted to instill fear and confusion in our immigrant communities. The Trump Administration attempt to add a question about citizenship that they knew could chill participation by immigrant communities is reflective of that broader, anti-democratic effort to silence our immigrant communities and push immigrants into the shadows.

In a city like New York City, the ultimate city of immigrants, excluding immigrants and their households from the Census count would be devastating. Almost 40 percent of our residents are immigrants, and 60 percent of City residents are either immigrants or children of immigrants. That includes nearly 500,000 undocumented New Yorkers. Looking at households, we know that one million New Yorkers live in "mixed-status" households where at least one member is undocumented. This includes 277,000 children, a majority of whom (77.8%) are U.S.-born citizens. To attempt to erase these New Yorkers from the official count is a naked attack on the city as a whole.

But we will not be pushed down and ignored by the federal government. We know that an undercount of immigrants is not inevitable. To the contrary, in 2010, some immigrant-dense neighborhoods, including Washington Heights and Jackson Heights, had self-response rates that were significantly higher than the average response rate of the city as a whole. We know that this is because of the work done in the community and with community organizations to do outreach. Through our work with NYC Census 2020, we can improve on the work of 2010 and collaborate with the community to ensure that everyone is counted.

Partnerships with the NYC Census 2020

With the creation of the NYC Census 2020 campaign and the appointment of Director Menin, the City is well on its way as we prepare for 2020.

We recognize that the federal government's efforts to sow fear and confusion must be countered with easy-to-understand information and outreach, including language access for our immigrant population. With that in mind, MOIA is partnering with NYC Census 2020 and other leaders in a few different ways – on community engagement, on inclusive and accessible funding strategies, and in communications and national advocacy.

I have spoken at numerous community events about the Census, starting as early as the spring of 2018. For example, in April of 2018, I participated in a community and ethnic media roundtable with Deputy Mayor Thompson and Director Lago of the Department of City Planning about the Census and how the media could help ease fears about the citizenship question—a question that now thanks to the State and City, among other partners will NOT be on the census. MOIA has participated in many other events since then, with partners across the administration, in order to provide the most up to date information about the Census. We have also shared best practices and strategies with cities across the nation through our Cities 4 Action (C4A) coalition. This is particularly useful because many of our sister offices in different cities are also tasked with implementation of Census outreach. In May of 2018, for example, C4A met in Boston for a best practices conference, with Census 2020 serving as one of the main topics. Joe Salvo from the Department of City Planning spoke about the importance of an accurate count, creating a city outreach office, and how to contextualize the importance of the Census for individuals. Since then, C4A held another best practices convening in Seattle just a month ago, where I shared a brief overview of Census 2020's work, including their outreach campaign pillars, and shared key findings from focus groups that Census 2020 held with several immigrant groups about the Census.

We know that a complete count depends on activation of all stakeholders, and that in particular we must work with community based organizations in order to reach each and every New Yorker. Given the special vulnerability of immigrant New Yorkers in this political climate, MOIA has consulted on Census 2020's RFP process to ensure that groups with deep ties to immigrant communities, including hard-to-reach immigrants can navigate the process and apply for funding.

Finally, we will be supporting NYC Census 2020 with communications around the Census. Part of that work involves engaging with community and ethnic media outlets, as they are the main source of information for many immigrant populations. Working with NYC Census 2020, we will ensure that we are communicating with hard to count immigrant populations, through the best medium and in the most effective ways.

Conclusion

I want to thank Director Menin, Deputy Director Bagga and the Census 2020 team, as well as the Department for City Planning for the work they are doing to ensure every New Yorker is counted.

I will end with this: the central goal of the Trump Administration has been to marginalize our immigrant families and to silence their voices by attempting to deny them the resources and representation they are entitled to—a make-up of America that is at once dishonest and insidious in nature. We know that the Census provides some of the strongest legal confidentiality protections available under this country's laws and further we know and have demonstrated as a city that we are committed to ensuring those laws are upheld.

If we have a census that results in our communities' undercount and a pervasive chilling of immigrant and other voices, the Trump Administration has achieved its goal.

While the Trump Administration continues to push for the exclusion of immigrant New Yorkers and other vulnerable populations from our civic life, we, alongside many others, are working to connect immigrants to information about their rights and services they need. And we look forward to continuing this work with the Census and the Council.

Thank you again to the Chairs for calling this important hearing. I look forward to any questions you might have.