

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 2, 2018

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

Dear Secretary Ross:

We are writing to express our deep concern regarding ongoing preparations for the 2020 Decennial Census, as it relates to the accurate enumeration of tribal communities across the country. Tribal communities present unique and challenging characteristics that require additional effort, foresight and planning to overcome. It is imperative that the Census Bureau makes every effort to demonstrate its commitment to these communities. We request that you provide our office with information related to Census Bureau's plans to ensure an accurate 2020 Decennial Census in tribal communities.

When the 2017 tests at the Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota and Colville Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land in Washington State were cancelled, it furthered our concern that, once again, the needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives were being set aside for other priorities.¹ While the ultimate goal of those tests was to examine the now abandoned tribal enrollment question, it would have provided an excellent opportunity to measure and understand the challenges the Census Bureau will face in 2020.² This was an opportunity lost.

For the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau has taken on the monumental task of moving away from paper questionnaires, to an internet-based collection method, which is expected to result in substantial cost savings.³ We applaud these efforts; however, it is imperative that we do not leave these families and communities behind. American Indians and Alaska Natives face additional challenges in responding to the Census, which will only be exacerbated by the move towards an online response platform.⁴ According to the Census Bureau's data, only 58.2 percent of American Indians use the internet, and cell phone coverage in rural areas is substandard.⁵ Therefore, it is critical that the Census Bureau take steps to ensure these communities are counted accurately.

¹ John H. Thompson, *U.S. Census Bureau Announces Changes to 2017 Field Tests* (Oct. 18, 2016), (https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/director/2016/10/u_s_census_bureaua.html).

² *American Indian Areas Named as Test Sites in Preparation for the 2020 Census* (Apr. 12, 2016), (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-64.html?cid=cb1664>).

³ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Briefing with Committee Staff: *Census 2020 Overview* (Dec. 7, 2016).

⁴ William P. O'Hare, *2020 Census Faces Challenges in Rural America*, Carsey Research, (Winter, 2017), 3, (<https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1329&context=carsey>).

⁵ National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations, Administrative Records, Internet, and Hard to Count Population Working Group, *Final Report*, (Sep. 20, 2016, 8:23 A.M.), 9, (https://www2.census.gov/cac/nac/reports/2016-07-admin_internet-wg-report.pdf).

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Throughout U.S. history, American Indians and Alaska Natives have faced systemic discrimination, leading to a heightened, and well deserved, distrust of the Federal government.⁶ For too long, we have given American Indians and Alaska Natives the leftovers. Members of these communities deserve to be counted where they reside, just like any other person. It is incumbent upon the Census Bureau to ensure that the burden of responding is no greater for these communities. Therefore, we request that you provide us with an actionable plan that ensures an accurate and cost effective process to count all American Indians and Alaska Natives. Steps must be taken to ensure that inaction in Washington does not lead to an unsuccessful 2020 Census for these communities.

Thank you for your attention in this matter. We request that you provide us with a written response no later than Thursday, August 16, 2018. If you have any questions, please contact Anthony Papian (Heitkamp) at anthony_papian@hsgac.senate.gov, Eric Reimers (Murkowski) at eric_reimers@murkowski.senate.gov and Denise Fleming (Klobuchar) at denise_fleming@rules.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

⁶ Ibid., 9.