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Actions Taken to Improve the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center Programs

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The Honorable Dan Miller
Chairman
The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on the Census
Committee on Government Reform
House of Representatives

The Bureau of the Census has included a number of coverage improvement initiatives in the 2000 Census that are designed to help increase the accuracy and completeness of the population count. These initiatives include a program called Be Counted as well as the opening of walk-in Questionnaire Assistance Centers. The Be Counted program is designed to count people who believe they did not receive a census questionnaire, or who were otherwise not included in the census. Aimed at traditionally hard-to-enumerate population groups, the Be Counted program is to make its forms available in various public locations, such as community centers, churches, and businesses. Questionnaire Assistance Centers are to help people—especially those with little or no English-speaking ability—complete their census questionnaires by providing assistance in various languages on a walk-in basis. The centers are also to distribute Be Counted forms. Both programs were tested as part of the Bureau's 1998 dress rehearsal for the 2000 Census.¹

As agreed with your offices, this report provides information on the status of the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center programs, paying particular attention to the steps the Bureau has taken to address certain shortcomings that the Bureau encountered during the dress rehearsal. To obtain the information, we interviewed Bureau officials from headquarters and local offices responsible for planning and implementing the two programs, as well as local government officials who helped the Bureau execute the dress rehearsal; made on-site inspections of Be Counted

¹ The dress rehearsal for the 2000 Census was held at three sites: Sacramento, CA; 11 counties in the Columbia, SC, area; and Menominee County in Wisconsin, including the Menominee American Indian Reservation. Dress Rehearsal Census Day was April 18, 1998. The dress rehearsal was to mirror, to the extent possible, the Bureau's operations and procedures planned for 2000 under as close to census-like conditions as possible.

program locations and Questionnaire Assistance Centers at the Sacramento and South Carolina dress rehearsal sites; and examined relevant Bureau documents and data, including the Bureau's May 1999 evaluation of the Be Counted program. We also reviewed evaluations by the Department of Commerce Inspector General of how the dress rehearsal Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center programs performed. We prepared this report in Washington, D.C., between December 1999 and January 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results in Brief

The Bureau has taken several important steps to improve the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center programs following the dress rehearsal. The Bureau's actions were necessary because the Bureau found that although the Be Counted program added people to the population totals, the program sites were not well targeted and people may have had trouble finding Be Counted forms in places where they were supposed to be available. The Bureau's findings are consistent with our observations during the dress rehearsal that processes and procedures used to select, staff, and monitor site locations did not always achieve their intended results.

The Bureau's actions to improve the programs include providing its Regional Census Centers with guidance on selecting and operating sites, as well as developing a form for Bureau staff to track the services provided by Questionnaire Assistance Centers on a daily basis, to help ensure that they are providing intended services.

The 85,221 Be Counted forms distributed at the three dress rehearsal sites added 1,477 people to the population totals, or about 0.14 percent of the total population of the three sites. The Bureau found that, compared with traditional mail return procedures, the Be Counted forms were more likely to include members of such typically undercounted populations as minority groups and the young.

If effectively implemented, the Bureau's actions could address the operational shortcomings it encountered during the dress rehearsal, by making the two programs more visible and accessible to traditionally undercounted populations. Nevertheless, some uncertainties remain. Key among them is whether the Bureau will open as many program sites as it originally planned and whether it has the ability to monitor and maintain them.

Background

Counting the 274 million people estimated to comprise the nation depends, in large part, on the Bureau's ability to "find" every U.S. household, and on people's willingness to be included in the census. However, the Bureau has found that enumerating people with no usual place of residence, those with limited English skills, and certain other population groups, is a particular challenge. To help overcome these obstacles, the Bureau plans a number of coverage improvement programs largely aimed at collecting census data from these special populations. Two such initiatives are the Be Counted program and the walk-in Questionnaire Assistance Centers.

The Bureau developed the Be Counted program to enumerate people who believe they did not receive a census questionnaire, or were otherwise not included in the census. The program also allows people who had no usual residence on Census Day, such as transients, migrants, or seasonal farm workers, to be included in the census. The Be Counted form is a short-form questionnaire specially modified to allow the Bureau to process and match the forms to the census results. The Bureau plans to place Be Counted forms in community centers, churches, businesses, and other public locations.

The Bureau estimates it will spend about \$2.6 million to print the forms, and another \$4.2 million to hire up to 8 clerical staff for each of its 520 local census offices to stock and maintain the sites. Most of the forms will be in English, but the Bureau also plans to print forms in Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Korean. The Bureau expects to distribute about 10 million forms during the course of the Be Counted program, which is scheduled to run from the end of questionnaire mailout until just before nonresponse follow-up (March 31 through April 11, 2000).

During the 1990 Census, the Bureau had a program it called "Were You Counted" that also distributed census questionnaires to the public. However, according to the Bureau, because the forms were not made available until the nonresponse follow-up period, the program was ineffective in collecting additional census data. Moreover, the public had to actively seek the forms by calling the Bureau.

The Bureau also plans to open Questionnaire Assistance Centers that are aimed at increasing coverage by helping people—especially those with language barriers—complete their census questionnaires by providing assistance in various languages on a walk-in basis. Assistance guides in 37 languages that are designed to help people complete their English language forms, as well as large-print English guides, are to be available at all Questionnaire Assistance Centers. Assistance guides in 12 additional

languages will be available at selected centers based on specific local needs. The centers are also to distribute Be Counted forms and remain open from March 8 (when questionnaires are to be first delivered) through April 14, 2000. The Bureau budgeted about \$24 million for operating the centers in fiscal year 2000.

The Dress Rehearsal Operations Suggested Opportunities for Improvements

About 1,500 persons, or 0.14 percent of the population totals, were added to the dress rehearsal population counts from Be Counted forms, as shown in table 1. According to the Bureau, these people would not have been included in the census had it not been for the Be Counted program. Moreover, according to a Bureau evaluation, the Be Counted forms were more likely to include members of minority groups and the young—two traditionally undercounted populations—when compared to the traditional mail return forms. For example, in Sacramento, the Bureau found that the Be Counted population was about 30 percent Asian, compared to about 17 percent Asian in the mail return population. African Americans represented about 20 percent of the Be Counted population, compared to about 13 percent in the mail return population. In South Carolina, 46 percent of the Be Counted population was African American, compared to 33 percent in the mail return population.

Table 1: Results of the Be Counted Program

	Sacramento	South Carolina	Menominee	Total
Number of Be Counted sites	218	183	16	417
Number of forms made available	24,249	59,272	1,700	85,221
Number of forms picked up	9,339	10,647	56	20,042
Number of forms returned	1,304	550	20	1,874
Number of returned forms included in the census	326	247	5	578
Number of addresses added to the census ^a	140	218	2	360
Total number of housing units at dress rehearsal site	158,281	273,497	2,046	433,824
Percentage of dress rehearsal site housing units added by Be Counted program	0.09%	0.08%	0.10%	0.08%
Number of people added	836	625	16	1,477
Dress rehearsal population count	403,313	662,140	4,738	1,070,191
Percentage of population added by Be Counted program	0.21%	0.09%	0.34%	0.14%

^aThis number includes addresses added by Be Counted forms completed as part of the Bureau's Telephone Questionnaire Assistance (TQA) operation, where census interviewers could take responses over the telephone from persons who did not have a questionnaire with a census identification number. The Bureau was unable to separate out Be Counted forms submitted through TQA.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Table 1 also shows that the Be Counted program "found" 360 addresses that would have otherwise been missed in the dress rehearsal. These addresses represent about 0.08 percent of the total number of housing unit addresses at the three dress rehearsal sites.

Overall, a Bureau evaluation of the Be Counted program concluded that it was generally successful in adding people to the census totals.² However, the evaluation expressed concern over the "moderate" percentage of forms picked up by the public compared to the number of forms the Bureau distributed at the three sites, as well as the progressively smaller number of forms returned to the Bureau for processing, and the number of forms ultimately included in the census (the Bureau did not formally evaluate the Questionnaire Assistance Centers). The Bureau attributed these results to the fact that people often had trouble finding the Be Counted forms in places where they were supposed to be available. According to the Bureau, the Be Counted sites appeared to be in locations that were poorly targeted and publicized.

The results of our own on-site inspections of Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center locations during the dress rehearsal and subsequent interviews with Bureau officials, indicated that there were shortcomings with (1) the procedures used to screen and select particular sites, (2) the degree to which the sites were visible to passers-by, (3) the adequacy of the Bureau's recordkeeping and monitoring of the sites, and (4) the Bureau's ability to keep Questionnaire Assistance Centers properly staffed. Since the dress rehearsal, the Bureau has taken a number of steps that, if effectively implemented, could improve the two programs by giving them more structure and organization.

Site Selection Procedures

The procedures used to select Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center locations will be critical to the effectiveness of the two programs because they will affect the extent to which sites are easily accessible to targeted population groups. According to Bureau officials, for the 2000 Census, sites are to be selected through a joint effort between Bureau employees, called partnership specialists, and local partners, including representatives of state and local governments, community organizations, and Complete Count Committees (which are to consist of representatives of local government, religious, media, education, and other community groups). Local partners are to use their knowledge of the community to help identify where Be Counted forms and Questionnaire Assistance

² See Census 2000 Dress Rehearsal Evaluation Memorandum D2, Evaluation of the Be Counted Program, U.S. Census Bureau, May 1999.

Centers might be needed, while partnership specialists are to work with local partners in selecting the sites and making them operational. The Bureau also plans to use a database containing information from the 1990 Census and other sources to help identify potentially hard-to-enumerate areas that could be flagged as possible Be Counted/Questionnaire Assistance Center locations.

The importance of close cooperation between the Bureau and local partners in selecting program sites was demonstrated during the dress rehearsal, when the effectiveness of the sites appeared to diminish when one group or the other had a limited role in the selection process. For example, according to a Bureau official, in South Carolina, although the Bureau asked the Complete Count Committees to suggest Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center locations, the Bureau was not always satisfied with the proposed locations. The official noted that several volunteer fire companies made the site list, even though they were only open to the public on a limited basis. Nevertheless, the Bureau accepted the results to accommodate local partners.

Sacramento encountered program site selection problems as well. For example, according to the Department of Commerce Inspector General, although the Bureau sought to consult with local partners to target Be Counted sites in undercounted and non-English-speaking neighborhoods, local partners provided few suggestions on locations and little advice on where to place foreign language forms. As a result, Sacramento census managers chose the Be Counted sites themselves, with mixed results.³

Since the dress rehearsal, the Bureau has taken several steps that could improve program site selection procedures. For example, the Bureau has developed guidelines containing factors to consider in selecting and operating sites, such as using mobile Questionnaire Assistance Centers in rural areas and making Be Counted forms available in multiunit dwellings in urban locations. Moreover, Bureau staff are to visit Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance sites in advance to ensure that they are acceptable.

Still, significant uncertainties remain. Key among these is the willingness of local partners to help in the selection process. Taking a census is a shared national undertaking requiring the active participation of

³ Bureau of the Census: Sacramento Dress Rehearsal Experience Suggests Changes to Improve Results of the 2000 Decennial Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Inspector General, ESD-10784-8-0001, September 1998.

individuals, organizations, and governments. However, the dress rehearsal demonstrated that the level of cooperation may be inconsistent and beyond the Bureau's ability to conclusively influence. For example, as previously noted, the Bureau expects to work with Complete Count Committees. However, while the Bureau had invited all 39,000 local and tribal governments across the nation to form committees, according to the Bureau, as of early February 2000, about 12,000 committees have been established.

In addition, questions surround the Bureau's ability to open as many sites as it originally planned, which could affect the likelihood that targeted groups will be able to find them. The Bureau anticipated setting up as many as 66,895 Be Counted locations, or about one Be Counted site for each census tract or neighborhood. Of these, 34,725 were to be stand-alone sites, and the remainder were to be located in each of the 32,170 Questionnaire Assistance Centers the Bureau expected to establish. However, the Bureau appears to be falling short of these objectives. According to Bureau data as of February 9, 2000, local partners had committed to 13,171 Be Counted sites, (about 38 percent of the 34,725 sites anticipated), and 18,383 Questionnaire Assistance Centers (about 57 percent of the 32,170 facilities anticipated). Although the Bureau expects to establish more sites, little time remains to achieve its objectives.

Program Site Visibility

"Street-level" visibility will be an important feature of the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center programs, because their effectiveness is directly related to peoples' ability to find them. The importance of visibility was demonstrated during the dress rehearsal, when the Be Counted program sites and Questionnaire Assistance Centers tended to be more visible in Sacramento and Menominee than in South Carolina. As shown on the left-hand page of figure 1, in Sacramento, Be Counted sites and Questionnaire Assistance Centers were located in such prominent places as shopping centers, ethnic markets, and government buildings that were highly visible to passers-by. For example, at the Sacramento City School District's Skills and Business Education Center, a large blue sign posted on a bulletin board notified visitors that a Questionnaire Assistance Center was located in the building.

In contrast, on the right-hand page of figure 1, the South Carolina sites were generally less prominent. In those locations we visited, there generally was nothing to indicate that census questionnaires or assistance was available at the site. For example (from top to bottom), at one of the Be Counted sites we visited, a homeless shelter in Fairfield County, census forms were indeed available, but no signs publicized their existence. In

addition, the forms were on top of a filing cabinet located behind a receptionist's desk, and thus would have likely gone unnoticed by visitors. Secondly, in a Questionnaire Assistance Center located at the Veterans Service Office in the Department of Veterans Affairs in Columbia, no signs were posted, in either the lobby of the building or in the office itself, to indicate to passers-by that they could obtain census questionnaires and help in completing their forms. Finally, in the bottom photo, the forms were placed in a reception area on the lowermost shelves of a magazine rack that contained, in addition to the forms, pamphlets on items of interest to veterans—and thus could have been overlooked.

Figure 1: Importance of Program Site Visibility

In Sacramento, Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center sites tended to be highly visible ...





... but in South Carolina,
program sites were less prominent,
and there were often no signs to indicate
the availability of census forms and assistance.

Source: GAO.

To help make the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center sites more visible for the 2000 Census, the Bureau has, among other actions, developed a template for a memorandum of understanding that the Bureau and local partners are to complete and sign. The memorandum commits both parties to, among other actions, publicizing the dates, locations, and hours of operation of the Questionnaire Assistance Centers in the local media.

Recordkeeping and Monitoring

Keeping Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center site information up-to-date and tracking usage will be key to making sure that people will be able to obtain forms when and where they are supposed to be available. For 2000, this task is to be assigned to Bureau personnel called Office Operations Supervisors. Each of the Bureau's 520 local offices is to have one supervisor. And, as noted earlier, local offices are also to have the authority to hire up to eight clerks to assist the supervisor.

The importance of good recordkeeping and monitoring was demonstrated in South Carolina where, according to the Bureau, because of South Carolina's difficulties in keeping program site information current, people had trouble obtaining forms where they were supposed to be located. For example, many of the sites on an initial Be Counted list were there because of commitments made by organizations in the Fall of 1997. By the time the dress rehearsal occurred the following April, some sites had decided not to participate, while in other cases either the volunteers or the locations had changed. Although the local partnership specialists were instructed to update the lists of Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance sites on a weekly basis, in some cases this timetable proved insufficient because changes took place more frequently. As a result, such essential information as changes to program site locations or points of contact were not always reflected in the Bureau's Be Counted/Questionnaire Assistance Center database. Further, the database contained several typographical and entry errors, and in several instances where an organization (e.g., a senior citizens center) had multiple facilities within the dress rehearsal area, the Bureau incorrectly assumed that since one site had committed to being a Be Counted or Questionnaire Assistance Center location, all the facilities had done so, and thus all were listed as active sites in the Bureau's database. In another instance, the addresses of several women's shelters, which were supposed to remain confidential, were included on a list of Be Counted sites.

The degree to which the Bureau will be able to track activity at each Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center site will be determined, in large part, by the extent to which the number of sites is aligned with the

logistical support available from local census offices. This fact was made clear during the dress rehearsal when, according to the Department of Commerce Inspector General, the number of Be Counted sites selected (218, as noted in table 1) was far more than Bureau staff could effectively manage. Local managers intended to monitor demand at the sites, but found that they did not have the resources available to do so. As a result, Sacramento was unable to identify poorly performing sites and possibly relocate them to more appropriate areas.⁴

In response, the Bureau issued guidelines highlighting the responsibility that local census offices have for updating site lists and monitoring usage, and developed a timeline for conducting specific tasks, such as resupplying sites with materials. The Bureau also developed a new, on-line form that is to track the services provided by each Questionnaire Assistance Center on a daily basis to make sure that each location is functioning properly and is appropriately staffed.

Nevertheless, keeping up with the workload required for a rigorous monitoring effort could prove challenging for the Bureau, especially if it comes close to establishing as many program sites as it had originally planned. The clerks who are to maintain the sites are to be responsible for (1) making advance visits to each location, (2) providing information to the Office Operations Supervisor to update and revise the Be Counted site list when necessary, (3) placing the Be Counted containers and resupplying them as required, and (4) picking up the containers at the end of the operation. In addition, when a Questionnaire Assistance Center is involved, Bureau employees are to complete the memorandum of understanding with local partners and help secure enough volunteers to staff each location. Although Bureau officials told us that the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center programs are "low maintenance" operations, the dress rehearsal suggested that the use of a large number of sites could overwhelm local staff.

Staffing Questionnaire Assistance Centers

The quality of service provided by Questionnaire Assistance Centers will depend heavily on the Bureau's ability to adequately staff the centers. For 2000, the Bureau plans to use a mixture of paid and volunteer staff. According to Bureau officials, each of the Bureau's 520 local census offices

⁴ U.S. Department of Commerce, ESD-10784-8-0001.

will be allowed to use up to 4,000 staff hours to staff Questionnaire Assistance Centers. The remaining positions are to be filled by volunteers.⁵

The significance of having adequate staffing was evident during the dress rehearsal. South Carolina relied on volunteers to staff Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Center sites, while Sacramento used paid temporary census employees who had received enumerator training from the Bureau. According to Bureau officials, Sacramento was better able to staff its sites, while South Carolina encountered a variety of problems. For example, according to Bureau officials, local partners and partnership specialists had difficulty finding volunteers to staff the assistance centers in South Carolina, in part because the Bureau was simultaneously recruiting for paid positions. Further, because the South Carolina volunteers could set their work hours, in some cases their hours of work were more limited than the hours of operation of the facility that housed the assistance center. Turnover among the volunteers also adversely affected the services that the Be Counted and Questionnaire Assistance Centers provided, as well as making it difficult to publicize the Questionnaire Assistance Centers because the Bureau could not know for certain when volunteers would be available to assist the public.

The memorandum of understanding that the Bureau and local partners are to sign could help alleviate some of these staffing problems. For example, local partners are to commit to providing questionnaire assistance at specific times in particular languages. This could help ensure more consistent and better quality service. Also, the Bureau is to make funds available specifically for hiring a limited number of assistance center staff, which should make the Bureau less reliant on volunteers and better able to hire employees with needed language and other skills.

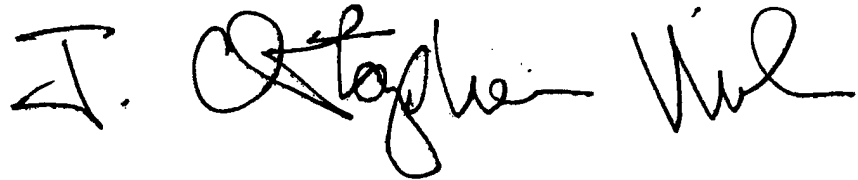
Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

On January 18, 2000, we discussed this report with senior Bureau officials. They generally agreed with our findings. On February 2, 2000, we requested comments on a draft of this report from the Secretary of Commerce by February 9, 2000. None were provided.

We are sending copies of this report to the Honorable William M. Daley, Secretary of Commerce, and the Honorable Kenneth Prewitt, Director of the Bureau of the Census. Copies will be made available to others on request.

⁵ The staffing challenges facing the Bureau for the 2000 Census are described more fully in GAO/GGD-00-6.

Please contact me on (202) 512-8676 if you have any questions. Key contributors to this report were Robert Goldenkoff, Victoria E. Miller, and Marcia McWreath.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Christopher Mihm". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "J." being particularly prominent.

J. Christopher Mihm
Associate Director, Federal Management
and Workforce Issues