Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 12, 2020

The Honorable Secretary Wilber Ross
US Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

We write you today to impress upon you the necessity of extending the enumeration period for the 2020 Census due to the social disruption caused by COVID-19. The Census Bureau currently plans to begin enumeration on April 1st followed by a series of follow-ups to be concluded by the end of July. On March 11th, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic and civil society has responded accordingly with institutions across the country beginning to close down non-essential operations in order to slow the spread of the virus.[1] As states and local jurisdictions continue to dedicate resources to expanding their capacity to respond to this outbreak, there will be diminishing state capacity to administer the Census coupled with pragmatic challenges caused by the outbreak itself. Any count done under these circumstances would not only fail to properly account for the current American population, but it could also have more targeted negative impacts on communities historically disadvantaged by the state and the census process.

According to the CDC as of March 11th, the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, has now been detected in over 100 locations internationally as well as 38 states and the District of Columbia.[2] While there are only 938 reported cases as of now, this number likely represents an undercount of cases across the country due to unmet demand for diagnostic testing. Locations with earlier outbreaks help illustrate this dynamic and emphasize the need for increased caution during this early response stage. In both South Korea and Seattle, for example, after numbers initially stagnated reported cases of coronavirus rose exponentially as both areas increased testing capacity.[3][4] As the nation as a whole continues to expand its testing capacity, the threat posed by COVID-19 will come into full relief. As Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci testified in front of the House Oversight Committee, "we will see more cases, and things will get worse." We must take steps now to ensure that the 2020 Census is prepared to adjust to the new reality that we may soon face.

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[1] Kopecki, Dawn. "World Health Organization declares the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic." *CNBC.* Accessed: March 11th, 2020
[2] CDC. "COVID-19: US at a Glance" *Center for Disease Control and Prevention.* Updated and Accessed: March 11th, 2020
[3] Snyder, Scott. "Long-Term Impacts of Coronavirus in South Korea." *Council on Foreign Relations.* March 11th, 2020
[4] Belluz, Julia. "Italy's coronavirus crisis could be America's." *Vox.* March 11th, 2020

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Unfortunately, the best practices necessary to effectively respond to the coronavirus outbreak actively impede an effective census count. Medical professionals have recommended all individuals practice social distancing to mitigate the risks of spreading the virus. Put simply, social distancing describes actions taken by public health and government officials to stop or slow down the spread of contagious disease by limiting the points of public contact. Common examples of this include closing public gatherings spots, canceling large social gatherings, and limiting or shuttering operations at social institutions. New York State has already declared New Rochelle, NY a containment zone closing schools and large gathering places for at least two weeks.[5] The nation must take similar aggressive action now to limit the opportunities to transmit the disease in order to avoid facing a similar fate.

Social distancing will make enumeration practically impossible during the current allotted time frame. First and foremost, the April 1st start date for enumeration coincides with what could be the crescendo of the outbreak. Considering the similarity in the rate of infections, government officials across the US may potentially find themselves in situations similar to that of Italy, which chose to effectively place its entire country under quarantine.[6] Italy went from 76 cases on February 23rd, to 229 cases on the 25th, until cases ballooned to over 12,000 cases as of March 11th.[7] If the over 900 reported cases represent only the beginning of the outbreak with a similar trajectory, the US could plausibly find itself in the position of asking hundreds of thousands of enumerators to fan out across the country to knock on doors at the height of the outbreak. Enumerators have historically had difficulty breaking through the stigma of a government official knocking on your door thus suggesting the fear of transmission will only amplify this challenge.

Self-reporting will also prove particularly difficult in an environment that does not encourage social gathering. The Census Bureau expects over 60% of Americans to self-respond to the census without interaction from an enumerator.[8] Eliminating large social gatherings typically used to raise awareness about the importance of the census in conjunction with reduced access to the Internet for marginalized communities will substantially impact the self-response rate and subsequently the accuracy of the overall count. Making matters worse, hard-to-count communities will likely be disproportionately negatively impacted by social distancing policies. The homeless, for example, typically get counted in homeless shelters or other charitable organizations where they may receive mail followed by a counting of those physically on the street. If these sites are closed in order to prevent the transmission of the disease and unnecessary travel remains limited, many Americans like these will simply fall through the cracks of the Census.

Many local jurisdictions also hoped that the Census Bureau's increased emphasis on online submissions would facilitate an elevated self-response rate and help capture

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[5] Chappell, Bill. "Coronavirus: New York Creates 'Containment Area' Around Cluster In New Rochelle." *NPR.* March 10th, 2020

[6] Belluz

[7] Belluz

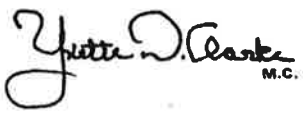
[8] Kulzick, Robert et al. "2020 Census Predictive Models and Audience Segmentation Report." *United States Census Bureau.* June 21, 2019.

historically hard-to-count communities. New Rochelle, NY and New York State again exemplify the difficulties jurisdictions will face regarding online self-reporting. Nearly 10% of residents in Westchester County as well as 13% of residents statewide do not have access to the Internet at home.[9] These individuals would need access to one of the Census Bureau's outreach sites that provide the public with an opportunity to access the Internet. In 2010, over 6,000 of these sites were libraries[10] and the Census Bureau's Community Partners and Supporters Page suggests a similar number of libraries will house such sites again this year.[11] If local businesses and libraries continue to close apace with our current infection trajectory, it would be unrealistic at best to assume the Census will meet its online reporting targets necessary to achieve their targeted response rate. Moreover, 40% of households making less than $20,000 annually in New York State lack an Internet subscription meaning those unable to respond online are those most in need of being counted.

Taken together, the necessary response to COVID-19 demands a set of social actions that create substantial pragmatic barriers to a complete count for the 2020 Census. We urge that the Census Bureau extends the enumeration period at least through September 2020 to allow for further outreach after the immediate response to the virus subsides. While the mandate to conduct the census comes from a Constitutional provision, it does provide for an extension of the enumeration window to the end of the calendar year if necessary. As the Supreme Court and legal scholars have made clear for centuries, the Constitution is not a suicide pact.

In full understanding of the weight of this moment, we implore you to follow the dictates of our Founding Fathers and extend the Census enumeration window.

Best,



YVETTE D. CLARKE
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[9] NYS Complete Count Commission. "A Roadmap to Achieving a Complete Count in New York State." *NYS Complete Count Commission.* October 2019
[10] Baker, Gavin. "Libraries and the 2020 Census." *American Library Association.* October 2018
[11] CDC. "Community Partners and Supporters." *Center for Disease Control and Prevention.* February 25, 2020

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