

Local leaders deride census methods

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Body

'Cookie-cutter' approach • Counting homeless, disabled, immigrants requires different strategy, advocates argue.

Need for outreach • **Census** Bureau taps churches to encourage congregations to fill out their forms.

Days after U.S. **Census** forms began hitting mailboxes, **local** religious and government **leaders** are sounding alarms that St. Louisans will be undercounted thanks to wasteful efforts and poor planning.

The criticism came at a roundtable hosted by the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, part of the federal government's push to encourage community **leaders** to promote the decennial head count and get residents to return **census** forms.

At Wednesday's roundtable, Josh Wiese, an aide to St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay, complained that the **census** was using "a cookie-cutter" approach to counting that wouldn't work in "high-crime, low-education" areas the same way it works in the suburbs.

"If this isn't done right, we'll certainly hold the **Census** Bureau accountable," Wiese told Cedric Grant, director of the U.S. Commerce Department's Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships program, representing the **Census** Bureau's parent agency.

Evan Armstrong, of the St. Louis-based International Institute, said he was frustrated that U.S. citizens are given preference for **census** field work, even if they don't speak the language of the refugee or immigrant groups they will be counting.

Both Wiese and St. Louis County planning manager Lori Fiegel brought up the challenges of counting the city's large Bosnian population. Fiegel said her office had been promised a Bosnian liaison, which never materialized. When a **census** official said the liaison had, indeed, been provided, Fiegel said no one had told her office about it.

"The Bosnian community is afraid of the government, afraid of the government, afraid of the government," Wiese said. "Then, on April 1, they're supposed to trust the government before going back to being afraid of the government again the next day."

William Siedhoff, director of the St. Louis Department of Human Services, said the city's own annual **census** of its homeless population, completed in January, would have to be repeated by **census** workers because the bureau didn't respond to the city's suggestion to partner on the January effort.

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David Newburger, from the city's office on the disabled, said data provided by the bureau to help reach the city's disabled citizens were not specific enough and should include street names. Grant said privacy issues prevented that specificity.

The contentious atmosphere at the roundtable "was based on past experience and the anticipation that undercounts are going to happen again," Siedhoff said after the meeting.

Dennis Johnson, the bureau's regional director, defended the census in an interview, saying the effort could not succeed without community partners.

"Someone looking for the federal government to provide all the tools is not going to reach every corner of the community," Johnson said. "But working through partners who already have outreach systems is one of the most effective communications vehicles the census has."

Local complaints mirror national ones. Last year, a string of independent reports from the Government Accountability Office and others found mismanagement and troubling computer failures at the Census Bureau.

The St. Louis area has had a troubled relationship with the census. Since 2003, Slay has successfully challenged annual estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau that portray the city as losing population. The census's annual estimates are less accurate than its constitutionally mandated decennial efforts.

On Monday, Slay said the failure of one individual to submit a 2010 census form would be equal to \$1,300 in lost federal aid each year. That means an undercount of 1,000 people would mean the loss of as much as \$13 million between today and the 2020 Census.

About \$400 billion in government funding is allocated each year to states, counties and cities based on population. The money goes to about 140 programs, including school lunches, senior citizen services and highway construction.

The census results determine the number of congressional seats received by each state, and population numbers are used to draw boundaries for state legislative districts and city wards.

U.S. Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-St. Louis, is chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees the census. He has said Missouri is among slow-growth states "on the cusp" of losing a congressional seat.

The 2010 forms have been streamlined compared with previous years and include only 10 questions. In early April, census workers will begin visiting homes that have not yet returned a form.

Ministers, especially among African-Americans, are seen as trustworthy sources of information, and the Census Bureau is relying on that relationship to get its message out.

Fourth Ward Alderman Samuel Moore, an elder in the Church of God in Christ denomination who is paying for his own efforts to promote the census, took issue with the bureau's broad effort to engage religious communities in its outreach.

"I have 110 churches in my ward ... and many of them are not taking part in this," Moore told Grant. "And even those that are, are preaching within the four walls of the church. If we're depending on the church to bring people to the census, it's not going to happen."

But the Rev. Charles Brown, pastor of Mount Airy Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis, said he knew of 150 Baptist pastors in the St. Louis area who had agreed to promote the census and encourage their flocks to fill out the form.

"We're doing our part," Brown said.

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Grant said after the roundtable that he understood the frustrations but pointed to the passion of the participants as evidence that the ultimate goal of the census will be met. "This is not a perfect product," Grant said. "But the word is getting out, and you can see by the discussion around this table today that there's an urgency to what we're doing."

Graphic

Photos by Emily Rasinski • erasinski@post-dispatch.com Harold Crumpton, National NAACP board member, asks a question during a roundtable Wednesday, part of the federal government's push to encourage community leaders to promote the U.S. census. The sign outside LaSalle Baptist Church at the corner of Park Avenue and Tucker Boulevard in downtown St. Louis encourages participation in the U.S. census. Mayor Francis Slay said Monday that the failure of one individual to submit a form would be equal to \$1,300 in lost federal aid each year. Cedric Grant (center), of the Department of Commerce, talks Wednesday with Florence Toma, of the Ark of Safety Center, and Craig Best, assistant regional census manager.

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