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October 31, 2019

The Honorable Steven Dillingham
Director
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Dr. Dillingham:

I write to express concerns with aspects of the Census Bureau's hiring for the 2020 Census. A report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), published on October 31, 2019, found that the Census Bureau is experiencing particular delays in hiring and onboarding staff.¹ To ensure the 2020 Census is accurate, on-time, and on-budget, the Bureau must be able to efficiently hire trusted local workers who can help count their communities. Efficient hiring is essential for cost-effectiveness, to ensure the Bureau remains productive and does not have unexpected last-minute costs. I urge the Bureau to fully resolve these problems as soon as possible, and to notify Congress of any additional support required to resolve them before peak 2020 Census operations.

According to GAO, the Census Bureau has repeatedly missed hiring targets and is experiencing background check delays. The Bureau fell far behind on hiring partnership specialists, who coordinate local outreach to ensure communities respond to the census. The Bureau had approximately 800 partnership specialists on board by June 30, 2019, its initial deadline to hire 1,501 specialists.² It then revised this deadline to September 1, but by that date had only 1,316 partnership specialists on board, with the remainder awaiting background checks. These delays mean that some partnership specialists have missed months of potential outreach in hard-to-count rural and urban areas. According to the Bureau and GAO, the Bureau also intended to have over 4,700 Recruiting Assistants on board by October 31, but as of October 16 had around 1,800.³

The Census Bureau attributes these missed deadlines largely to delays in processing background clearances. GAO and the Commerce Department Inspector General have long warned of potential problems with the Census Bureau's background check process.⁴ According to GAO, in December 2018 the Census Bureau began to encounter a growing backlog of background checks "which the

¹ GAO, *2020 Census: Status Update on Early Operations* (Oct. 31, 2019) (<https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/702459.pdf>)

² GAO, *2020 Census: Bureau Is Making Progress Opening Offices and Recruiting, but Could Improve Its Ability to Evaluate Training* (July 19, 2019) (<https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/700375.pdf>)

³ GAO (Oct. 31, 2019); briefings to HSGAC staff.

⁴ Department of Commerce Office of the Inspector General, *2020 Census: The Bureau's Background Check Office Is Not Fully Prepared for the 2020 Census* (Feb. 27, 2018) (https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/2018-02_27_OIG-18-015-A.pdf)

Bureau did not have the resources to clear,” with over 7,000 background clearances pending by March 2019.⁵ In February 2019, the Bureau began to bring on 130 temporary staff to review clearances. Nevertheless, a backlog of background clearances continues.

Hiring issues may be unevenly distributed across the country. According to GAO and the Bureau, some applicants have had to travel long distances to be fingerprinted for background checks, particularly applicants in rural areas. This has led to 25% attrition at the fingerprinting stage. In addition, the Census Bureau reported difficulty recruiting in many areas of the country, particularly rural areas, because Bureau pay rates were too low, local employment rates were high, and the Bureau experienced outreach challenges.⁶

Early delays in Census hiring can cascade into later hiring issues. For example, according to the Bureau, delays in early hiring for Area Census Office staff meant some offices “do not have enough clerks in place to process the paperwork or make the required phone calls necessary” for later hiring. The Census Bureau has experienced a 68% attrition rate during the hiring process, due to delays in background checks, fingerprinting, and follow-up. These findings raise concerns about the Bureau’s ability to hire its required workforce for peak operations in 2020.

The Bureau told GAO it plans to respond to these issues by “attempting to get more resources for background clearance staff,” “revisiting protocols” including reminder phone calls to applicants, adjusting for high attrition, expanding the number of fingerprinting locations, and adding training for replacement hires.

I ask that the Bureau provide detailed plans to respond to these issues, as well as answers to the following questions, by November 15, 2019.

- Did the Bureau receive expected applicants from all regions and states for early operations positions? Has it received expected applicants from all regions and states for peak operations positions? Please provide data on the number of expected versus actual applicants for each region.
- In which localities has the Bureau found that its pay rates for temporary positions are not competitive, and will the Bureau make corrections in each locality? Please provide a list of the localities.
- What is the current backlog of background checks and when do you expect it to be cleared? When did you first identify that the background check processes and staff would not be sufficient to clear all background checks? How many Census Bureau federal employees and how many contractors are now processing background checks and how many are planned?

⁵ GAO (July 19, 2019)

⁶ GAO (Oct, 31, 2019). The Denver Regional Census Office reported difficulty recruiting because of unemployment rate and salary concerns in the region (12 states). The Philadelphia office (8 states) reported that pay rates were too low specifically in rural locations. There were also low salary issues in areas of Florida and California. In other locations, including diverse rural areas, the Bureau faced other outreach challenges.

- Through what evaluation process did the Bureau determine that its proposed changes to the hiring process will allow it to catch up for past hiring goals and meet its future hiring goals on time? Please provide a list of all interim and final hiring deadlines or milestones for each 2020 Census position, including dates and associated goal numbers.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gary C. Peters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Gary" being the most prominent.

Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member