

“A Primer on the Census: Counting Heads and Counting Costs”
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Amanda Stitt spoke at the meeting hosted by the Progressive Women’s Alliance on Wed., Feb. 17, 2010. PWA prepared the following account of her remarks.

“We like to think that voters choose their politicians, but in the redistricting process, every ten years, the politicians choose their voters.” Brennan Center for Justice

The 2010 Census is upon us. Census workers are being hired, advertisements have hit the airwaves and nonprofit organizations are being trained to help the census reach hard to track populations. The census means much more than finding out how many people live within the United States. The census data that is collected will be used to calculate federal, state, and local spending for critical programs over the next ten years. It is estimated that for every individual not counted in the census there will be an economic loss of \$1,000 per person per year for the next ten years.

The census also affects voting power. Michigan will lose one representative and is in danger of losing a second. Redistricting is inevitable, and the ruling political party will carve up the state’s districts. In 2001, Michigan lost one seat, resulting in 15 representatives instead of 16. The Republican Party controlled the House, Senate and Governor’s office, and redistricting saw the Congressional Delegation go from 10 Democrats and 6 Republicans to 6 Democrats and 9 Republicans. The elections of 2010 will impact the state for the next decade.

It is vital to encourage all Michigan residents to fill out and return their census form and to educate our communities about the current redistricting process as well as the importance of mapping the new districts in a way that reflects the diversity of the community represented there.

What You Need to Know About the Census

Previously, the census consisted of a short and long form. Some households received only the short form, while others received both forms. The 2010 Census has done away with the long form. All households will now only receive a short form, which consists of ten questions and takes ten minutes to complete. The information previously collected on the long form is now being collected separately on a rotating, consistent basis called the American Community Survey. The census does not ask for social security numbers or the legal status of respondents. There is no on-line option for completing the census form. All forms are to be returned by mail. Households not returning the form can expect a knock on the door from canvassers who will be going door to door in an effort to reach hard to track populations as well as those who neglected to complete their survey.

Challenges Facing the Census

Michigan is the most challenged economy in the country, and therefore, poses many challenges to achieving an accurate census count. Many people have lost jobs or had their homes foreclosed on, which means a lot of displaced people and increased homelessness. There is also a great deal of mistrust of the government in minority populations, and Michigan has a significant Arab American population. Snowbirds also pose a unique challenge. People living out of state during

the census might be inclined to fill out an out of state census form rather than the Michigan form, doing so results in an economic loss for Michigan. 14.03% of the Kent County population is included in hard to count tracts, and 12.5% of the total Michigan population. It is important that all of these challenges are minimized in order to ensure the state receives fair representation and adequate resources over the next decade.

What is the Role of Nonprofits in the Census?

Nonprofits are encouraged to partner with the census to help reach out to hard to count populations. The Michigan Nonprofit Association Complete Count Committee is working with nonprofits to provide training and resources to help them successfully reach out to their communities. Nonprofits are vital to this process because of the trust already established within the community and because it's been shown that similar cultural backgrounds influence a higher response.

Michigan's Redistricting Process

In Michigan, the legislature handles redistricting for the legislative and congressional districts. The House and Senate must approve the plan, and a supermajority is not required for passage. The governor has veto power. Redistricting must be completed before the state primary elections. If a plan is not passed by November 1, 2011, the Michigan Supreme Court will intervene. Since 1963, there has only been one instance in which the Michigan Supreme Court did not have to step in.

Redistricting in Michigan remains a largely closed-door process with little input beyond the controlling party, and, as a result, there is little to no transparency, independence or guidance in the current process as well as a lack of diversity. The general population does not have a voice in the way the districts are ultimately divided.

Federal law requires that districts maintain an equal population and adhere to the Voting Rights Act in regards to race/ethnicity. Michigan also has enacted the APOL standards in an effort to protect the diversity of the districts. Yet, even with these laws, the resulting maps rarely reflect the diverse populations of the state.

A Call for Reform to the Redistricting Process

The way Michigan manages redistricting can and should change. A more effective process would allow for public input, before and after drafts made available for discussion, data and tools to facilitate response, a degree of explanation from the redistricting body, a redistricting body that reflects the diversity of the state, and a membership system that helps to maintain an independent redistricting body and mapping process.

Looking at Redistricting in 2011

There are a lot of unknowns in the coming elections. The vast majority of the state Senate and 1/3 of the state House seats will be open as well as the governor's seat. The elected officials chosen to fill these seats will move to create districts with the most political power for themselves in the years to come.

This mindset has led to concerns about creating fair and reflective districts. As a result, conversations are currently taking place in regards to the creation of a shadow commission with the purpose of establishing an independent body focused on drawing district boundaries reflective of the diverse population within the state.

There is also a possibility of mounting a Voting Rights Act challenge in Metro Detroit based on a situation called packing. Packing involves concentrating minorities in districts in a way that dilutes their power, and is currently the situation Detroit is experiencing.

Citizens can help influence these possibilities by educating themselves and others, creating alternate maps with considerations of community boundaries and diversity, attending hearings, and considering their local districts. If citizens are able to make themselves heard it will be harder for the legislative body in charge to continue a closed-door redistricting process.

Summary prepared by Charlsie Dewey, of the PWA Program Committee.