



Census flag flies over the entrance to Marvin Gaye Park, April 1, reminding citizens that being counted in 2010 is “in our hands.”

U.S. Census Gaps Persist

Outreach Battles Under-Counting, Non-Response Expense

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

“**F**or each DC resident not counted in the 2000 U.S. Census, the District lost \$35,000 in the last ten years,” says Philip Pannell, community activist and temporary Census employee.

The U.S. Census determines how federal funds are divided, so the District lost \$3,500 annually for each individual who should have been counted in 2000 but was not. Each 100 persons not counted cost the District \$3.5 million.

“That lost money could have funded libraries, recreation centers, senior services!” Pannell exclaims. “As a baby boomer looking to retire, I’m very aware of the need for additional senior housing, wellness centers and other services....And it is particularly important for challenged communities to respond to the Census, to get the things that are needed.”

Participation Gaps

On “Census Day,” April 1, nearly half of all District households had yet to be counted. To compare: the Bethesda, MD, area had participation rates of 67-69%. Participation rates east of the river are generally lower than the District average. The count varies greatly, however, with some areas most needing resources the most under-counted.

On April 2, most census tracts east of the river showed 41-50% participation, just below the District average. Eight tracts along Pennsylvania Avenue and just north of Penn Branch, as well as one tract in the Capitol View area, had participation rates between 51% and 60%. Penn Branch/Fort Dupont had the highest participation east of the river – 63% -- with only Barnaby Woods, in far northwest, having a higher response rate.

Meanwhile, just 31% of households in the Barry Farm area had responded. Only a few District tracts

had lower response rates. Seven more tracts in Ward 8, including the southern-most neighborhoods, had participation rates lower than 40%; similarly, only 37% of households in Marshall Heights (Ward 7) had returned forms.

Partnerships for Participation

Pannell is helping to organize Census outreach events. On April 1, for example, the Census partnered with Washington Parks and People on Marvin Gaye’s birthday celebration.

Washington Parks and People’s Autumn Saxton-Ross learned firsthand how important census data is while completing research for her doctoral dissertation on health in African American populations. “Those numbers determine where resources are needed and where dollars are sent. Federal dollars will help fund programming in this newly renovated park. Our organization – like any non-profit receiving federal dollars – exists as a di-

rect result of the census numbers.”

Eager for the current count to accurately reflect community needs, Saxton-Ross urged the Census partnership. Encouragement to return census forms was part of event publicity. Census employees reminded participants to return forms, answered questions and distributed small reminder gifts. Riverside Center volunteers offered nutrition information in “Support your community...Stand Up and Be Counted” tote bags. In addition, Riverside Center hosted testing and training for local residents to serve as Census Takers.

“If you see someone you know at the door,” explains Saxton-Ross, “you’re more likely to open the door...Knowing the issues in the neighborhood, we cannot afford to lose money due to under-counting. We need that money.”

Fear of Counting?

Many individuals – especially those in what researchers call “unusual housing situations” -- fear that personal information could be used against them.

“Due to the economy, people now have two or three families in one apartment -- which is illegal – and people believe that the government will send someone out to get them , if they answer the Census,” says Theresa Jones, chair of ANC 8D. “People need to understand that Census information cannot be shared with anyone. Not the landlord. Not IRS. Not Immigration.”

In fact, Census employees swear an oath not to disclose any information and face fines up to \$250,000 and imprisonment for any violation. Names and addresses are separated from individuals’ answers. Information is protected from everyone, including police, welfare agencies, the White House and the Supreme Court.

It’s Not Too Late

Census Takers begin visiting non-responding homes on May 1. Every form returned in the meantime saves taxpayers \$56. Moreover, information shared with the U.S. Census helps communities get their fair share of \$400 billion annually.

Contact the Census help center at 1-866-872-6868 with any questions or concerns. ★