

Statement of Senator Thomas R. Carper

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

April 15, 2008

“Census in Peril: Getting the 2010 Decennial Back on Track, Part II”

The committee will come to order.

I'd like to start by thanking Senator Lieberman and Senator Collins for working with us again to continue our oversight in this area.

My thanks as well to our witnesses for taking for taking the time to be here. You also deserve some thanks for all of the time you've been putting in over the past several weeks and months to try and get the planning and early preparations for the 2010 census back on track.

Last month, we held a hearing about problems that the Census Bureau was having with a project it calls “Field Data Collection Automation.” This is a project that, for a number of years now, has been a major part of the Bureau's efforts to streamline decennial operations and find cost savings.

The major component of the project is hundreds of thousands of handheld computers that census-takers would use to verify addresses and, later on, to collect information door to door from households that do not initially mail in their census forms.

At our hearing, Commerce and Census officials admitted for the first time that the handhelds did not work as well as they originally planned. They also admitted that, contrary to previous administration testimony to Congress, the handhelds may not be a viable option come 2010.

We've been informed now that, due in part to the very short amount between now and the beginning of major decennial operations, the handhelds will be largely ditched in favor of the “paper and pencil” counting method used since the very first census more than 200 years ago.

I know that a limited number of the handhelds will be used next year to perform some address verification work in the field. And I know that there are some technological and other improvements to the census process this time that should result in some efficiencies. But I'm disappointed that, at a time when so many countries are relying to a greater and greater degree on technology to do their census work, we're stuck with what is probably the most rudimentary enumeration method out there.

The method the Census Bureau will be using to count non-responders in 2010 also seems to be the most expensive out there. Just over a month ago, the life cycle cost of the entire 2010 census was supposed to be about \$11.5 billion. Now, due largely to the need to hire more census-takers, costs could go as high as \$14.5 billion. That is more than twice the cost of the 2000 census.

I still have some questions about how we got to this point. It's not clear to me, for example, why the top managers at Commerce and the Census did not know until very recently about the very serious problems with the handhelds contract.

Both you, Secretary Gutierrez, and Director Murdock should be commended for moving quickly to find a solution once you were fully informed about the mess you had on your hands. But I don't know why your predecessors weren't able to take similar action much earlier, even when experts like GAO were warning that things were not right. Earlier action could have saved the handhelds and probably a lot of money as well.

That said, we're probably at a point where we need to limit the finger-pointing and figure out quickly what needs to be done to get us the best, most accurate census we can get.

The Census Bureau has been spending the better part of a decade planning – some might say hoping - to use some sort of handheld device for non-response follow up in 2010. Now, the Bureau must quickly pivot and develop new plans and procedures for handling paper census reforms. Getting the right plans in place, testing them, and making the appropriate adjustments before the 2010 count begins will be vital to getting a good response rate, collecting reliable data, and ensuring that decennial operations run smoothly. Poor planning and testing can only lead to confusion, wasted resources, and a bad final product.

So I look forward to learning not only about what went wrong with the handheld project, but about what the leadership at Commerce and Census plans to do to set things right. It's clear from the testimony we have before us today that reverting to paper does not solve all of the problems with the 2010 census. We need to move quickly together if we really are going to put preparations for the 2010 back on track.