Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney
Opening Statement
Joint Economic Committee Hearing
July 21, 2009

Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome our two distinguished panels of witnesses and thank them for agreeing to testify today on the role of the Census Bureau in the 21st century.

This is the first in a series of hearings the Joint Economic Committee will hold to examine the state of the federal statistical system. The data collected by our statistical agencies are vital to informing policy debates and evaluating the effectiveness of those policies we put into place.

As we debate health care reform, Census data tells us that 46 million Americans are without health insurance.

Unemployment, family income, poverty – the numbers we see in the headlines every day – they are our motivation for making policies and writing legislation. Federal statistics are a bargain, costing between $10 and $25 per person each year, but the information gleaned is invaluable.

I cannot stress enough how heavily policy makers on this committee and at all levels of government rely on the data produced by the Census Bureau as we weigh policy options. The data enables us to evaluate whether or not a policy is achieving the goals we intended.

We begin today by focusing on the Census Bureau, the country's largest principal statistical agency. Census is most well known for its role in conducting the national census every 10 years. Beyond that, the Bureau conducts the annual American Community Survey, and many other surveys that provide key information on other economic and demographic subject areas. The Bureau's population estimates determine congressional districts, and drive how we allocate funding for millions of dollars in federal aid.

There is no doubt of the Bureau's significance and the importance of the work it does. But I am concerned when I see that the new Director of the Census Bureau, Dr. Robert Groves, was confirmed by the Senate just last week – six months into the new administration, and less than a year – 261 days according to the countdown on the Bureau's website -- before Census Day 2010 on April 1, 2010.

The decennial census – the largest peacetime mobilization of government workers – takes place every ten years, but the leadership changes every four years with a new Administration. But statistical agencies like the Census Bureau should be absent political pressures so that the data remains unbiased and objective.

Today we will hear from former Census Directors who combined have almost twenty years experience spanning five Administrations. Yet, we find ourselves in the same peril today as in previous decades, like some heroine tied to the railroad tracks. Given that we have a wealth of expertise and knowledge in conducting the census and we know how important sound data is to policymaking, I am interested to hear your perspectives on how to avoid flirting with disaster every decade. I would like to hear your practical suggestions of how we can avoid ending up in the same predicament in 2020.

I have introduced legislation, which you have all endorsed, to give the Census Bureau independent status, similar to the National Science Foundation and NASA. Other federal statistical agencies, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Energy Information Administration, are part of another Executive branch agency but the director is appointed for a fixed term.

In order to be relevant to policy decisions, the major ongoing surveys conducted by the Census Bureau need regular review, updating, and sometimes, complete redesign depending on economic, social, and technological changes. The Bush administration era cuts to our statistical and scientific infrastructure budgets have undermined our ability to evaluate the effectiveness of our policies.

We must impress upon those around us the value of the federal statistical system and challenge lawmakers and departments to support the system with resources and ensure that the statistical agencies maintain a strong position of independence.

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