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To: New York State Complete County Commission

Re: The Role of New York state libraries in the 2020 Census

Date: May 7, 2019

My name is Casey Conlin and I'm the Library Sustainability Coordinator at the Mid-Hudson Library System (MHLS). At MHLS, we support our 66 member libraries in Putnam, Dutchess, Ulster, Columbia, and Greene counties in identifying and meeting the needs of the people they serve.

Some people call public libraries the Swiss Army knives of their communities. I think that's a good description to keep in mind as the Census, something our communities haven't had to address in ten years, approaches with some new twists. The online tools the Census will use next year to help enumerate our population will bring efficiency to the process and help count a lot of people, but if we want to ensure everyone's democratic right to representation, and build an accurate picture of our population to base strategic decisions on and to use in allocating funds, we're going to need to count everyone. Not just the people who already recognize the value of completing the Census, and not just the people who have access to the internet at home. We're going to need flexible organizations and adaptable approaches if we want to count everyone. We're going to need our libraries. In New York, we're lucky to have over 750 public libraries all over the state, all with experience in providing digital training, an incredible amount of trust, and the ability to partner with other organizations to expand their reach.

Libraries provide internet access to the nearly 20% of New Yorkers who lack broadband at home. In MHLS libraries, people used our public computers to access the internet over a half a million times last year. Every day, library staff help people do everything from print out pictures of their grand kids from Facebook to filling out job applications and accessing tax forms. Public library staff are experts in helping people navigate digital resources and protecting patron information, and when the Census is released, they'll be trained in best practices for helping people access and complete the Census, which means people who don't have or can't even get broadband access at home will have the chance to be counted at their library.

We know from tests and pilots run by the Census Bureau that filling out the Census is not high on a lot of people's to-do lists. We also know that educating people about why the Census is important, and how it affects them, makes them much more likely to complete it. Libraries are trusted educators, open to everyone in their community, and 100% of hard-to-count populations live within 1 mile of their public library. Each time someone visits the library is an opportunity to let them know that their participation in the Census affects funding for WIC, HEAP, local schools, Medicaid, or community development grants.

But we can't do it alone, so we're building partnerships and Complete Count Committees with local governments, community groups, schools, and anyone that can help get the word out about the importance of completing the Census. These partnerships and this coordination will mean more resources so we can reach further, and more trust so we can reach deeper into our community and get as many people as possible to participate in the Census.

Everyone deserves to be counted in the 2020 Census, and we all stand to lose a lot of aid at the state and local level if we fail to count everyone. As the Swiss Army knives our communities need right now, public libraries are going to work hard to make sure we get as many people counted as possible. But State Aid for libraries is not currently funded at the statutory level, and more funding would expand libraries' abilities and reach in the effort to get everyone counted.

Respectfully submitted,

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