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**Testimony of Arab-American Family Support Center; NYS Complete Count Public
Hearing
Monday, March 11, 2019**

I want to begin by thanking Governor Andrew Cuomo and the NYS Complete Count Commission for inviting community-based organizations to comment on the upcoming Census. My name is Kerry Sesil, Director of Development and Communications at the Arab-American Family Support Center (AAFSC). I am honored to testify today on behalf the immigrant and refugee families we serve throughout New York City.

At the Arab-American Family Support Center, we have strengthened immigrant and refugee families since 1994. We promote well-being, prevent violence, prepare families to learn, work, and succeed, and amplify the voices of marginalized populations. Our organization serves all who are in need, but over nearly 25 years of experience, we have gained cultural and linguistic competency serving New York's growing Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian communities.

As a culturally and linguistically competent, community-based organization and as a trusted resource for immigrants and refugees throughout New York City, AAFSC is committed to ensuring an accurate count in Census 2020. The census will impact the number of votes New York has in the Electoral college, ultimately influencing broader legislation and leadership. Further, the Census will determine funding and resources over the next ten years. Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian immigrant communities cannot afford to lose already limited resource allocations. As an organization that intimately understands the extent of community needs, this matters deeply to us.

We know that many Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian, and other immigrant community members are either suspicious and fearful of the Census or are unaware of its importance. Many of our community members have told us that they fear the Census will be used to target immigrants and could result in deportation and family separation. This is no surprise. The families we serve are already dealing with deportation and family separation daily. Many of our program participants come from countries targeted by the series of executive orders culminating in Presidential Proclamation 9645, popularly known as the Travel Ban, which now blocks entrance of individuals from Yemen, Iran, and Somalia. Far more were threatened by campaign promises to ban Muslims from coming to the United States, and all immigrants continue to suffer the consequences of hostile narratives that drive policies and practices targeting foreign-born populations. Recently proposed changes to the definition of public charge

have also made community members more reluctant to take advantage of services and opportunities that are rightfully available to them.

The fear is only exacerbated with the potential of a citizenship question on the Census. It is critical to note that even legal residents are wary of attracting government scrutiny. Keep in mind that amidst existing fear around immigration, many individuals suffered trauma in their countries of origin that make participation in a government survey even more challenging.

Further, the Census remains far from inclusive. Despite years of advocacy, a category for Middle East/North African will not be available under racial or ethnic identity on the 2020 form. Instead, people from these groups will be instructed to select “White” – a term that few use to self-identify and which many feel inaccurately portrays their lived experience. While this is not subject to change for Census 2020, it is important to understand the lack of inclusion is a barrier to participation.

All these obstacles mean that government agencies, funders, and community based organizations need to prepare for concerted outreach and education leading up to the Census. AAFSC stands ready to educate community members through outreach events, digital media campaigns, our Adult Education and Civics classes, Legal Services, and other programs. Our staff speak 17 languages including Arabic, Bangla, Hindi, Nepali, Urdu, Pashto, and Punjabi and over 30 dialects, positioning us as a trusted resource. We will do everything we can to ensure fair and accurate counting, but we cannot do it alone.

In light of these observations, AAFSC:

- **Welcomes measures by New York State to ensure that all residents—regardless of age, wealth, income, employment, or immigration status—have access to the support, information, and resources they need to complete the Census.**
- **Applauds efforts by New York State to file lawsuits that challenge the proposed question on citizenship status and to proactively protect all immigrants from risk of deportation.**
- **Urges the city, state, and community-based organizations to work together and leverage each other’s strengths for maximum impact.**
- **Respectfully requests that city and state authorities continue to include culturally and linguistically competent service providers like the Arab-American Family Support Center in conversations around funding and resource allocation leading up to the Census so that we can dedicate the appropriate staff and resources to this crucial initiative.**

Thank you for your attention. As always, the Arab-American Family Support Center stands ready to work with you in ensuring the most vulnerable among us thrive.