State Data Centers, Census Information Centers, and Data Dissemination and Training Branch Annual Meeting

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

July 25, 2023

- Good morning, everyone. It's great to see many of you again! We met virtually at last year's conference, and it's an honor to be here in person with you today.

- The State Data Centers and Census Information Centers are such important partners in our work. You've been providing feedback to the Census Bureau for many decades. We are so appreciative of those ongoing relationships and the insights you have given us over the years. I'm grateful to be at this conference, which is one of the ways that we are working to keep those lines of communication open.

- I want to thank both the SDC and CIC Steering Committees for your leadership in keeping these programs vibrant. Special thank you to Sai Mullapudi from the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley, and Mary Craigle from the Montana SDC for serving on the Steering Committee. This is Sai and Mary's fourth time serving on these committees! We appreciate your dedication to the network and your willingness to serve.

- Each year the SDC and CIC Steering Committees present a member of their respective networks with an award honoring their outstanding service and contribution, and I want to acknowledge them today.

- This year the SDC Steering Committee presented the Gustafson Award to Mary Craigle for her leadership, innovation, and dedication to the SDC Program and the data community. Her knowledge and use of data has greatly impacted the state of Montana.

- And the CIC Steering Committee presented the Falcón-Wade Award to Melanie Poulter of the Tulsa Area United Way, for her leadership and dedication to the CIC Program and the advancement of underserved communities through the power of data.

- And of course, I can't let our wonderful Data Dissemination and Training Branch go unnoticed. I can't say enough about how important you are. Your firsthand experience with the public and our data is so important, and you have so many valuable insights into how we can better serve our nation.

- You were so quick to adapt to a 100 percent virtual environment during the pandemic. During FY20, the Data Dissemination team conducted over 850 data workshops, trainings, and presentations. These numbers have remained steadily high since then.

- Demand for the Webinar Facilitation Team doubled during the pandemic, and the audience tripled between that time and the present.

- Since the pandemic began, the Census Academy team has presented 78 national webinars to over 22,000 attendees, with a customer satisfaction rate of 90 percent overall. They also created a new Data Equity resource page and 21 Data Gems. Thank you for all the work you do, and I look forward to meeting with you later this week.

- But let me return to my original statement, that it's an honor to be here with you today.

- As we all know, the pandemic shut down the nation just before Census Day in 2020. The Census Bureau nimbly adapted our massive decennial census operation. And when its grip on society was strongest, we still had to deploy hundreds of thousands of enumerators to knock on doors across our nation. We had a constitutional mandate to fulfill.

- All the while, new challenges unfolded, such as natural disasters like wildfires and hurricanes. Yet, despite unprecedented challenges, our career staff came together and completed the job we set out to do—that of counting the resident population of the United States. I'm incredibly proud of their accomplishments.

- But we recognize something important. We didn't complete this job alone. We needed the help of the people in this room, of our complete count committees, the help of state and local governments, and the help of national and local partners and stakeholders. Not to mention cooperation from the public.

- We adapted our communication and outreach strategies when the pandemic made original plans unworkable.

- Without your support, we could not have achieved the measure of success we did attain. We recognize and deeply appreciate that.

- Over the past year, I have been traveling across the country to get the message out about the census and host listening sessions so I can better understand the needs and concerns of all stakeholders. In every state I visit, I look to see if there is a SDC and/or CIC located close by.

- I have had the pleasure of meeting several of you during these visits and learning more about your SDCs and CICs and the amazing work you do to support the census. I've visited the Hispanic Leadership Institute, Vanderbilt University, Medgar Evers College, Spelman College, and the State Data Centers in Georgia, Texas, and Tennessee, to name a few.

- As we prepare for the remaining 2020 decennial data to be released, I want to thank you in advance for your help in getting the word out and helping the communities in which you serve understand and use the data.

- And your knowledge of your communities is one reason why we're so keen to hear your ideas about what to research and how to conduct the 2030 Census. When we published the Federal Register notice last August, we had a tremendous response. We really appreciate your suggestions on the role of SDCs and CICs in the decennial census, and how we can we engage you better and more effectively in 2030.

- We learned a lot from the uniqueness of the 2020 Census, but hearing from our partners this early in the planning will help us shape the 2030 Census and beyond.

- Let me tell you a little about how the Census Bureau is reaching out to our partners and the public. It's important because it includes you.

- Now, the ability of the Census Bureau to adapt nimbly during the pandemic really opened our eyes. It showed us something we thought was impossible: that of adapting to and overcoming threats and doing so quickly.

- That experience motivated the development of a robust transformation and modernization initiative to recreate how we do our work at the Census Bureau. We are undertaking a paradigm shift in how the Census Bureau collects, processes, and disseminates our statistical data products.

- It involves the development of new systems to bring together data from all sources—both administrative data and data from surveys and censused. We will use new systems to create more efficient and effective data products that better meet the needs of data users.

- I knew that such a transformation requires broad level of buy-in from our staff. I saw the opportunity to bolster that transformation with an accompanying culture change. But a specific type of change . . . one that inspires staff to innovate by realizing the value of diverse perspectives.

- Actively seeking and valuing different views from different partners in the enterprise leads to better insights, creative solutions, and better methods and products.

- This is consistent with the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but you really don't need those terms to understand the value that flows from different ideas and perspectives on a problem.

- But if you take this cultural change to its natural conclusion, then we must also actively seek and value diverse perspectives of our external stakeholders, partners, data users, and the public. And that includes folks like everyone here, today.

- So, I've spent this last year laying the groundwork to create continuous, ongoing community engagement in its broadest sense. I and Census Bureau staff met with numerous scientific and government associations. We've conducted listening sessions with stakeholders representing both communities and data users. I spoke at conferences.

- Internally, I've met with career staff at all levels and in offices around the country. I went out on multiple field observations for a housing survey and the American Community Survey.

- I've conducted numerous media interviews and used blogs, videos, and other communications to reach out to stakeholders and the public. I met with tribal leaders from around the country.

- Throughout these engagements, we listened carefully, we strengthened existing ties, and we established new relationships. I must say, the experience was profound.

- I engaged with rural America and witnessed the struggles and joys of the lives of farmers and smalltown businesses. I visited inner-city neighborhoods; I spoke to local community leaders and pastors who recognized the value of local statistical data and expressed concern about data quality. I witnessed the dignity of America's indigenous people and their honorable, indeed sacred way of life through living with nature. And I met with scholars and researchers from across the nation to understand their concerns.

- After all these amazing experiences, here's my bottom line: I learned that it takes a community-of-the-whole to maintain a fully functioning and successful federal statistical agency. We need to seek and act on feedback from stakeholders, partners, and the public.

- We should be continuously communicating a value proposition that highlights the utility of our statistical data products for your communities. We need to expand and nurture a trusted-messenger ecosystem of partners and stakeholders that operates continuously, not just near the time of decennial census. Such an ecosystem is a key for us to collect data from historically recalcitrant segments of our wonderfully diverse population.

- And that's why I wanted to meet with you today.

- Yes, it's clear that we need to exploit new technologies, new methods, and new sources data. But we need to do this in a way engages with and benefits partners, data users, communities, tribes, government, and the public. That is, people like you, and the communities you serve.

- That necessarily includes underserved communities, communities of color, rural populations, tribes—all the people who pose measurement and participation challenges to us. Only then will we be able to stay true to our mission: to produce quality data on our nation's people and economy.

- Bottom line: We want to help you to serve your constituencies better by helping you to leverage the value of our data.

- Let's now turn to this year's planning priorities for the Census Bureau.

- I'll start with the modernization of surveys. Household and economic surveys are increasingly difficult to conduct. We see declining participation rates and rising per unit costs. So, we need to explore and invest in more tailored approaches. We'll be modernizing our data collection operation by exploring alternative data sources to supplement survey data, blended data approaches, and the expansion of AI to ease the burden of collection.

- The next priority area is administrative records enumeration. The 2020 Post-Enumeration Survey suggested that the accuracy of responses using administrative records exceeded those provided by proxy interviews. We need to exploit that. We'll focus on expanding administrative data sources and conducting research to improve decennial census coverage and quality.

- Research will guide us to where administrative records are most effective including among historically undercounted populations. Ultimately, administrative records usage will permit more resources for tailored approaches to historically undercounted populations.

- External engagement is a priority area. As I said earlier, we need a community-of-the-whole effort to accomplish our mission. The net must be cast broadly and involve a two-way flow of ideas, suggestions, concerns, and feedback. We'll continue to strengthen ties with our data users. We'll develop data tools and products tailored to different user communities. And we'll review and facilitate access to data from our Federal Research Data Centers.

- We'll strengthen ties with tribes on a nation-to-nation basis, and conduct outreach to communities that have concentrations of historically undercounted populations. Partnerships will be leveraged with universities in historically Black and Hispanic colleges and universities and tribal colleges, like those we have in place with Bowie State University in Maryland and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

- Besides external engagement, we will have complementary efforts with internal engagement. After all, a community-of-the-whole approach also includes the Census Bureau's most valuable assets—our career staff.

- And finally, there's our economic statistics modernization priority area. We seek to leverage emerging methods including AI and machine learning. Those are our priority areas for 2023.

- I can't thank you enough for your work in bringing Census Bureau data to people across the country. I appreciate your support and enthusiasm and look forward to receiving your ideas.

- Thank you again for having me. Thank you again for your engagement, and invaluable help getting information on the 2020 Census. And I am so excited to be part of the decade-long journey working toward the 2030 Census with you.

- This is deeply important work. It's a labor of love, and I'm proud that we are formally engaging the public this early in the process. I appreciate your support and enthusiasm and look forward to receiving your ideas.