

Native America, open door to census and be counted

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As children growing up on reservations or in villages, we quickly learn our numbers. We learn how to count, how to add and subtract, and then soon learn the value of money. And counting and understanding mathematics has become more important for Native Americans in recent years as we look at statistics: Indians continue to have the highest rates of unemployment, lowest rates of homeownership and the least amount of access to health care when compared with other races in the United States. Some of these issues are addressed with an annual appropriation from Congress. But Congress doesn't know how much to allocate to our communities unless we have accurate numbers.

As door-to-door enumeration continues for the 2010 Census, counting in Native communities becomes even more relevant. An accurate count of American Indians and Alaska Natives means better access to federal resources and fair representation in state legislatures and Congress. But equally important, the census determines the annual distribution of more than \$1 billion in federal funds annually for tribal roads, schools, veterans, senior citizens, health care and housing.

As an example, since 2006 tribes in New Mexico have received nearly \$67.4 million for housing, excluding the Navajo Nation. The funding, which the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Southwest Office of Native American Programs says is solely based on census data, was used for new construction or rehabilitation. The Navajo Nation, which straddles across New Mexico and Arizona and is the largest tribe in the U.S., received \$248 million for new housing or rehabilitation since 2007.

I know there are many challenges to obtaining an accurate census count in Indian Country, including language barriers, unmarked or difficult-to-find addresses and a historic mistrust of government institutions. But the Census Bureau has worked with area tribes and hired tribal representatives who understand and are respectful of our people and culture. The Census Bureau also has call assistance centers to answer any inquiries about the questionnaire, which the Census Bureau says is the shortest in history (10 questions in 10 minutes). The National Congress of American Indians, the oldest and largest advocacy group for Native Americans, is also partnering with the census and has created an information website, Indian Country Counts at www.indiancountrycounts.org, to aid tribal people. Answers can also be found on the U.S. Census Bureau's website at 2010.census.gov.

So please join me in answering the door when the census worker arrives to continuing opening up opportunities for our people. And those who missed the census worker can still call in their information at 866-872-6868.

The theme of the 2010 Census is to paint a Portrait of America. Although American Indians and Alaska Natives make up less than 1 percent of the entire U.S. population and 11 percent of the state, we need to make sure all of Native America is counted to ensure that this Portrait of America is correct.

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