

Accurate census count critical for RI

In his recent speech to the General Assembly outlining his proposed budget for the next fiscal year starting on July 1, Governor Almond's proposal for a \$2.3 billion state spending package will require an increase of \$97.2 million over this year. Meanwhile there will be a small decrease in the state income tax. Beyond increased spending and reduced state income taxes there is another variable that will affect the state budget, but that opportunity comes only this year.

Total spending in the state for the provision of services to all of our communities is actually considerably higher than just the proposed state spending. Federal funding, whether providing for highways, hospitals, welfare benefits, job training and a host of other community needs, is a major contributor to all governmental spending in the state.

In this smallest state that amount of federal funding amounts to \$2.3 billion, just one-half of all spending by the state. Most of that federal help comes to the state based upon its population. But the problem that Rhode Island is likely to be one of only three states in the nation to experience population loss over the last ten years, that will be determined by the April 1, 2000 census. And therein lies the problem, for a reduced population means a reduced amount of federal funding.

It is important to note that this lower population figure will be used by the state

in determining how much federal help we get for each of the next ten years, i.e., until the next census takes place in 2010 to give us a new set of figures. But there is a way to increase our population total so that the loss of population projected is lessened or perhaps even

shows a population gain. That way is to get a more accurate count of population than we have done in the past. This is especially true for the minority community.

In 1990, as a result of the post census sampling of the population, it was determined that 4 million persons, or 1.6 percent of the population, were not counted. This undercount was particularly acute in those states and cities with large minority populations. While fewer than one percent of the white population was not counted, it is estimated that 5 percent of the Hispanics and over 4 percent of Blacks were not counted.

This undercount translates into lost federal funds. For example, the state of California estimated a \$100 loss of federal dollars for each person not counted, and with an estimated 800,000 persons not counted, the state calculated a loss of \$80 million of federal money for each year of the '90s.

Further, it also meant the loss of another House of Representatives member.

Using that \$100 per person lost through undercount for Providence, where there was

an undercount of just over 2 percent in 1990, the amount of federal funds lost annually amounts to ap-

proximately \$350,000. Similar undercounts and lost federal dollars are found in other communities with large minorities, such as Central Falls and Pawtucket. So what can be done?

This is where the leadership of the business community comes into play. For it is the businesses of the state, be it manufacturing or service provision, which employ many minorities, and it is in the plants and stores that business firms can make their employees, all of them, including immigrants who also avoid being counted, aware of the necessity of being counted.

If an employer does not have all of the census information, does not know how best to communicate this information to his employees or simply needs help in performing this task, then a phone call to either the Providence or Warwick offices of the Census will help. In fact, the partnership specialist in the

office is there specifically to help businesses reach its employees, especially those that traditionally have not been counted because of their unfamiliarity with the necessity to be counted and sometimes distrust of government because of previous foreign experiences.

At a time when the Census Bureau, for the first time is spending \$180 million on advertising, something it has never done, rather just relying on public service announcements, it is necessary that all segments of society work to reach a full count. But it is the business community that needs to shoulder a bigger load because they have demonstrated their ability to get things done, and this is a job that must be done if the state is going to get its true share of federal dollars.

A call to the Providence Office at 553-2030 or the Warwick Office at 737-5807 to speak to the business partnership specialist will start the process. With their help and the work of conscientious employees who can reach out to all of their employees, we can get a higher count, perhaps show a gain in population and increase the share of federal dollars coming into the state. The business community has an opportunity to make a difference. With strong leadership they can.

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Commentary

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