May XX, 2018

The Honorable Ron Johnson                                    The Honorable Claire McCaskill

Chairman                                                                  Ranking Member

Senate Committee on Homeland Security                      Senate Committee on Homeland Security

   and Government Affairs                                               and Government Affairs

Washington, D.C. 20510                                         Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member McCaskill:

The Leadership Council of Aging Organizations (LCAO) is a coalition of 70 national nonprofit organizations concerned with the well-being of America's older population and committed to representing their interests in the policy-making arena. We are writing to urge you to hold oversight hearings promptly on Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross’s decision to include a new citizenship question on the 2020 decennial census. We share the Secretary’s stated goal of a fair and accurate census; however, the addition of an untested citizenship question after years of careful, and costly, research, testing, and planning will compromise preparations for the 2020 Census, thereby jeopardizing the accuracy of the count in all communities—an outcome that the nation will have to live with for the next ten years.

An accurate census is critical to ensuring that federal dollars are fairly and accurately distributed. Federal programs support the basic living standards for millions of older Americans, workers and their families – helping them put food on the table, pay for their homes and see a doctor. Earned benefits under Medicare and Social Security provide essential support for tens of millions of seniors and their families. Half of individuals with Medicare have incomes below just $26,200 and more than one in five older Americans receive 90% of their retirement income from Social Security.

In fiscal year 2015, the US Census Bureau estimated that census data was used to distribute more than $675 Billion in funds to 132 programs. (Hotchkiss, Phelan, “Uses of Census Bureau Data in Federal Funds Distribution”, US Census Bureau, Issued September 2017; <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/working-papers/Uses-of-Census-Bureau-Data-in-Federal-Funds-Distribution.pdf>).

A substantial number of these programs serve older Americans, including but not limited to:

* Medical Assistance Program (Medicaid)
* Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
* Medicare Part B Physicians Fee Schedule Services
* Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher
* Section 8 Housing Assistance Payments
* Low Income Home Energy Assistance
* Community Development Block Grants/Entitlement Grants
* Social Services Block Grant
* Capital Assistance Program for Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities
* Senior Community Service Employment Program
* Supportive Housing for the Elderly
* Title VII Programs for Prevention of Elder Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation
* State Grants for Protection and Advocacy Services

Two of the critical issues that we believe should be answered in any hearing are how adding a citizenship question to the census that has not been tested will affect the validity and reliability of responses; and whether a citizenship question will depress participation and therefore limit the ability of the Census Bureau to reach and count all communities equally well, especially in the current environment where minority populations may be afraid of identifying themselves.

As former census directors from both Republican and Democratic administrations stated in a January 26, 2018 letter to the Secretary, “We strongly believe that adding an untested question on citizenship status at this late point in the decennial planning process would put the accuracy of the enumeration and success of the census in all communities at grave risk.”

Finally, we believe that it is not, as Secretary Ross asserts, the responsibility of stakeholders to demonstrate that including a citizenship question will depress response rates. Rather, it is the Secretary’s job to ensure through rigorous research and testing that the question will not affect the level of responses. The Census Bureau noted, in a presentation in November 2017, that there was growing fear and reluctance to fill out the census in the current political climate. A citizenship question is likely to exacerbate those fears. Secretary Ross must explain and document with objective scientific evidence why he believes this would not be the case.

We urge the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs to conduct oversight hearings on the Commerce Secretary’s decision to add a citizenship question to the decennial census as soon as possible. Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

?? cc: House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform