



Preserving our Democracy

BY JEFFERY FRASER

2020 promises to be a momentous year for American democracy. The country will elect a president. And a decennial census is being taken whose outcome influences how billions of federal dollars are shared among states and counties across the nation.

In preparation, The Heinz Endowments launched a Democracy and Civic Participation initiative last year to help coordinate and bolster support for a network of nonprofit organizations across the state working to make sure that the census count is complete, that people in marginalized communities are able to vote, and that gaping holes in the security of Pennsylvania's election system are closed.

No one imagined that events so influential to how democracy is practiced in the United States would unfold under the cloud of the worst pandemic in more than a century.

But they are. And nonprofits working with support from the Endowments initiative are positioning themselves to adapt their missions to the realities of community engagement during the COVID-19 crisis.

The stakes are high.

Complete census counts provide a more accurate demographic and economic profile of a city, county, region and state. Just as important, the amount of federal dollars that flow into a state is based in large part on census data. That affects how much is available for just about every key social safety net program, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that helps vulnerable populations put food on their tables, affordable housing programs and Medicaid.

Pennsylvania relies on about \$39 billion in federal funds that are directly tied to the census count. For every person who goes uncounted, the state loses \$2,093 of that money a year until the next decennial census is taken in 2030.

A statewide table of nonprofits estimated that \$25 million was needed to ensure a complete count. Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf was able to get General Assembly to commit only \$4 million in taxpayer dollars to the endeavor. The Endowments, the William Penn Foundation, the Bauman Foundation and others contributed with support for a nonprofit collaborative to increasing citizen participation in the census,

especially among people of color and immigrants, through efforts that explain why the census is important and how to complete it.

"We, as a philanthropy, invest in social safety net issues and social welfare. If resources coming into Pennsylvania are diminished, the demands on philanthropy increase," said Matthew Barron, the Endowments' Sustainability program officer. "We don't have the resources to do that, nor should it be philanthropy's role to do that."

Many of the nonprofits doing census work are also conducting voter registration drives focused on people of color and other residents who've long been underrepresented on registration rolls.

Pennsylvania recently enacted a series of reforms throughout its election system. For the first time, for example, Pennsylvanians are able to vote by mail without having a state-approved excuse to do so. The timing was fortuitous, given the social distancing restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic. Concern over the spread of the virus forced the primary election to be rescheduled to June, and by May, nearly 1 million had applied for a mail-in ballot.

But that change has little impact on most people of color. In a majority of southwestern Pennsylvania counties, fewer than one-third of voting-aged people of color are registered to vote.

Those who do, however, can be assured that elections in Pennsylvania are more secure. U.S. intelligence agencies have gathered substantial evidence showing that cyber hacking networks linked to Russia have been using tactics to sow discontent and disrupt U.S. elections since 2016, and have probed voter registration rolls in Pennsylvania and other states.

To address these issues, this election will have several security upgrades in Pennsylvania. Among them are new electronic voting machines that are backed up by paper ballots to ensure tamper-resistant counts and close a troubling security gap identified in a risk assessment by the Institute of Cyber Law, Policy and Security at the University of Pittsburgh with funding from the Endowments.

Supporting such organizations has enabled the Endowments' Democracy and Civic Participation initiative to leverage more than \$4.6 million from national foundations and donor collaboratives to put toward census, election security and voter registration efforts.

"Having partners on the ground who are making a long-term, place-based commitment is something national donors look for," Mr. Barron said. "And we've been able to pull more resources into Pennsylvania because of it." **h**