

# Colorado has a plan to ensure a more accurate census count

BY ANDREA TERES-MARTINEZ

SUMMIT DAILY

Colorado has a census problem, and it's costing the state millions of dollars in federal funding and adequate political representation. The state is partnering with nonprofits to find a solution before the 2030 census.

In May the state demography office released its 2030 Census Strategic Action Plan. The document outlines the state's approach and challenges encountered during the 2020 census, using those lessons to develop recommendations for a more accurate count in 2030.

At the center of the state's plan for the 2030 census is a mission to achieve more participation from undercounted communities that often face unique barriers to participating in the census collection.

"One of the things that we learned from the 2020 census, as dynamic as that count was because of the COVID-19 pandemic, is that it's actually really important to have as long of a runway as possible to get to the point where people choose to be counted," said Marco Dorado, managing director of Communities Lead Communities Thrive. "Asking someone to be counted requires trust. You don't build trust overnight."

Communities Lead Communities Thrive is a statewide coalition of nonprofits working to break down barriers to state grant funding for organizations serving historically underrepresented communities, including those in rural and western Colorado.

Collected every 10 years, the census is used to determine how much federal funding flows to Colorado each year, impacting critical services like schools, hospitals, housing and transportation. However, undercounting in rural, immigrant, low-income and minority communities has translated to millions in lost funding and inadequate political representation.

The demography office estimates that federal funding tied to census data totaled \$2,300 per resident in 2016. That means that even if 1,000 Colorado residents were to be undercounted in a census year, that would be a loss of about \$2 million for a state that has faced annual budget shortfalls for two consecutive years.

The census also determines how many seats each state receives in the U.S. House of Representatives and how legislative districts are drawn, affecting its influence in Congress and the Electoral College. The data helps researchers, businesses and governments make informed decisions about investments, infrastructure and services, according to a news release from Communities Lead Communities Thrive.

"Because the census only happens once every 10 years, it is paramount that we ensure that communities across Colorado are counted," Dorado said. "If there's an undercount, the impacts are substantial. From a federal funding perspective, that can mean billions of dollars that we lose simply because of an undercount. The need doesn't go away."

The core of Communities Lead Communities Thrive's work before the 2030 census is to strengthen the partnership between the state and the nonprofit sector by elevating the voices of community-based organizations

that serve historically marginalized and excluded communities, Dorado said. Nonprofits, he added, have become critical to reaching and providing resources for those communities to participate in the census.

“Nonprofits played a really important role in helping the state reach hard-to-count communities in 2020, (and) nonprofits will play a really strong role in 2030,” Dorado said. “We recognize from the get-go that nonprofits are such a strong partner ... in addressing issues and challenges that the state doesn’t have the infrastructure to address, whether that’s mental health support, food banks, housing.”

Hard-to-count communities often can include racial and ethnic minorities, people whose primary language is not English, low-income populations, undocumented immigrants, people with disabilities and people who don’t live in traditional housing.

Dorado said some of the most pressing barriers to participation for rural mountain communities on Colorado’s Western Slope can include language barriers, confidentiality concerns, accessibility challenges and even physical distance.

“Oftentimes in rural communities ... geographic isolation makes it so that there is more difficulty for census workers to reach all members of a community,” Dorado said. “Here in Denver, you walk down a block, and you’ve passed 500 people. Whereas, if you’re in Basalt, you drive down five miles and you might have passed 10.”

Hard-to-count residents also can be harder to locate because of living in homes that are not on the Census Bureau’s list of addresses, or they can be difficult to contact because of being highly mobile or experiencing homelessness.

According to the demography office, Colorado is vulnerable to population undercounts because of greater representation of many hard-to-count populations relative to other states.

With the uptick in federal immigration enforcement experienced by several Colorado counties since President Donald Trump took office, some immigrants — particularly those who are undocumented or from mixed-status families — may be more hesitant to participate in census data collection because of fears of deportation and distrust of government agencies.

Federal law provides strong privacy protections for census responses. Personal, identifiable responses are confidential and cannot be shared legally with other government agencies at the federal or state levels, including immigration customs enforcement, law enforcement or tax authorities.

“We are, I think, operating in really uncertain times, and people are feeling the risk associated with, ‘How do you engage with the government?’ ” Dorado said. “A complete and accurate census count truly depends on everyone feeling safe and confident in participating, so I think that ... nonprofits can help address some of those concerns.” The release of the state’s action plan also comes on the heels of the Census Bureau’s decision to remove Colorado Springs from its list of planned census testing sites, which Dorado said eliminated an opportunity for Colorado to refine outreach strategies and build early partnerships before the next census.