



February 12, 2018

Jennifer Jessup  
Departmental Paperwork Clearance Officer  
Department of Commerce  
Room 6616  
14th and Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20230  
Docket number USBC-2017-0005

Dear Ms. Jessup:

The National Association of the Deaf, American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, Cerebral Palsy and Deaf Organization, Deaf Seniors of America, National Black Deaf Advocates, National Association of State Agencies of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Association of Late-Deafened Adults, Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc., Communication Service for the Deaf, Inc., and California Coalition of Agencies Serving the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc. (collectively “Consumer Groups”) submit these comments pursuant to the December 12, 2017 Notice by the Department of Commerce (“the Department”) in the above-referenced proceeding which seeks comments on its proposed and/or continuing information collections for the U.S. Census Bureau (“Bureau”) and its 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) as well as the 2020 Census.

The Consumer Groups are a coalition of the above listed organizations that work together to advocate for equal access in a variety of areas. The Consumer Groups represent the interests of 48 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the United States. Our work encompasses advocacy on issues such as



Telecommunications Relay Services, Internet and television captioning, accessible travel, and more. We are greatly concerned with the Bureau's refusal to recognize American Sign Language (ASL) as a language completely distinct from the English language. In fact, we are appalled that the Bureau has considered ASL to be a subset of the English-language category and as a result has declined to gather data on ASL.

As the Census Bureau notes on its website, the "Bureau asks three questions to gather data on those speaking a language other than English at home, what that language is, and how well each person speaks English."<sup>1</sup> The Bureau purports that it does not need to identify ASL users in a discrete category as follows:

**Does the Census Bureau provide the number of people who use American Sign Language (ASL)?**

*The three questions used to capture languages spoken and English-speaking ability are not designed to identify American Sign Language users. [...] The Census Bureau counts ASL speakers among those who speak English.*

It is improper and highly offensive that ASL users are counted as being English speakers. Such a treatment of ASL is a total linguistic failure on the Bureau's part and is not based on any sound scientific or linguistic basis. ASL is not derivative of English but instead originated independently of English linguistic influence.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Language Use: Frequently Asked Questions* (September 12, 2017), <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/language-use/about/faqs.html>



ASL is a distinct natural language pursuant to the definitions set by linguists with its own syntax, morphology, phonology and structure. ASL does not follow the syntax, morphology, phonology, or structure of English. No linguist considers ASL as being based on English by any measure. A person who uses ASL does not necessarily know English, and therefore the statement that “the Census Bureau counts ASL speakers among those who speak English” is incorrect and baseless.

The stated design of the language question, which is “to gather data on those speaking a language other than English at home [and] what that language is” applies to people who use only ASL at home and may have difficulty with English. If a house contained a family of five members, with all having fluency in French and only one person has fluency in English, that information is captured in the Census. However, if a house contained a family of five deaf members, and all are fluent in ASL but only one is also fluent in English, that same information should also be captured in the Census.

This failure to identify ASL users in a discrete category represents a missed opportunity to collect critical information for identification of unmet service needs, such as emergency preparedness, transportation, health care and housing. As long as ASL is currently and erroneously included in the “English language” category, there are no reliable counts of native signers and signing households available to the various groups, entities, and organizations that use language data from the Census to determine service needs and requirements for language minority groups. Federal agencies, organizations, local governments, and private enterprises rely on the Bureau's language data to determine how and where to provide language services. In



fact, in its request for comment, the Department emphasizes that its survey is "one of the Department of Commerce's most valuable data products, used extensively by businesses, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local governments, and many federal agencies."

Consumer Groups urge the Department to immediately correct its information and policy so that future censuses and surveys are more accurate and include this valuable information on our community.

Furthermore, in its request for comment, the Department expresses the concern that the current wording of certain survey questions in the 2019 ACS may not be fully understood by some respondents. For the same reasons explained above, we urge the Department to provide an online link with ASL video versions of the English questions as to ensure that the survey questions are fully understood by ASL users. With such information in ASL, the Department will see improved accuracy and reliability of responses, decreased item non-response, and increased levels of detailed reporting for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. This would go a long way towards improving the quality of data collected for both the next ACS as well as the 2020 Census which is already slated to be provided online in multiple languages.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/  
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