

Despite coronavirus concerns, local leaders push participation in 2020 census

[Mica Soellner](#), Appleton Post-Crescent Published 12:46 p.m. CT March 19, 2020 | Updated 12:32 a.m. CT March 21, 2020

APPLETON - For months, local volunteers promoted the 2020 census.

They held monthly meetings. They formed relationships with nonprofits, community organizations, educators and religious leaders. They backed the 2020 census at events around Outagamie County, whether it was holding a booth at a major event or simply wearing an "I count" pin when interacting with the public.

The members of the county's complete count committee had one motto since late last year: 10-10-10. That's 10 questions that take 10 minutes to complete for 10 years of government funding for the local community.

Now, as the coronavirus pandemic forces people to close their doors to the outside world, some members wonder if their efforts were in vain while others see the time of suggested quarantine as a silver lining for motivation.

Either way, they're not giving up on getting the word out, especially as the first mailers begin to go out to residents.

"There's a lot of uncertainty going around and that includes what the results are going to be with the census," said Tammy Geenen, a committee member and vice president of community engagement at the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region.

Committee members are transitioning outreach efforts to online with a heavy push on social media.

Oladimeji Tomori, a committee member involved with interfaith organization ESTHER, said he hopes sending the message about the census through social media can still reach those without access to technology.

"We can reinforce more on social media because a lot of our folks are still on social media to try and get people who don't have computers or Internet," Tomori said. "We can still reinforce to our neighbors and get them to pass the message on."

The U.S. Census Bureau put out a release saying it will continue monitoring the coronavirus situation and follow any guidelines provided by medical authorities.

As of March 15, the bureau reported they've received over 5 million online responses to the 2020 census.

The current deadline for data collection is July 31, 2020, but can be adjusted if needed in regard to the coronavirus situation.

Jerry Iverson, chairman of the county's complete count committee, said with the potential economic implications of the coronavirus outbreak, it's even more important to fill out the census to receive adequate funding.

"With the coronavirus, we will see some economic impact and the census will provide a benchmark for allocations to communities after the coronavirus has decreased and we do start to recover," Iverson said.

With the 2020 census being the first test for online participation, the bureau is encouraging residents to respond virtually, but every household has the option to respond by telephone or paper questionnaire.

Geenen said she particularly worries about the relationships the committee has formed with community organizations related to hard-to-count populations, or people historically at risk of being undercounted in the census.

"There's some unknowns about how the coronavirus is going to effect census outreach especially with nonprofit organizations that were creating awareness efforts with some of the historically underrepresented groups in the census," Geenen said. "Now, with those nonprofits focusing their attention with the needs related to the coronavirus, it's hard to know how much time they'll be able to spend doing some of that census outreach."

Without an accurate census count, states can lose out on a considerable amount of federal funding, which can impact rural development, health care, veterans' assistance, education and employment services.

The count also determines congressional representation and historically, as census numbers change, so do the number of lawmakers serving in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But, committee member Shirley Strange says she's hopeful that a benefit of people staying at home to avoid the virus is they may have more time on their hands.

"Undercounting would be not advantageous for our community," Strange said. "Every single person who responds is going to do our community a great favor and (to) themselves. We will all profit from everyone's response. People are home. It's a very easy thing to do. Now you have the time to do it."

Census forms are sent out through the March 20. Residents can call 844- 330-2020 to fill out the census via telephone or go to <https://my2020census.gov/> to fill it out online.

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