

December 16, 2019

Via email and first-class mail

Dr. Steven Dillingham, Director
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

RE: Need For Increased Language Access Services For Cambodian-American Community

Dear Dr. Dillingham,

On behalf of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA)—a non-profit community organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for Cambodians and Cambodian-Americans—we write to request that the Bureau expand language access to Census 2020 for the Cambodian-American community. The community’s historical linguistic and social isolation in the United States render Cambodian-Americans uniquely vulnerable to an undercount. *See* U.S. Const., Art. I, § 2, cl. 3 (mandating that Congress conduct an “actual Enumeration” of the “whole number of persons in each state” every decade). Specifically, we urge the Bureau to make the Internet Self-Response and telephone Census Questionnaire Assistance available in Khmer, or, in the alternative, to provide funding to Cambodian-American community organizations to translate and disseminate Census materials.

CMAA knows firsthand how critical it is for the Census Bureau to provide adequate language access services in Khmer. Lowell, Massachusetts is home to one of the country’s largest Cambodian communities, with approximately 14,000 Cambodian-American residents. Like most Cambodian communities in the United States, Lowell’s Cambodian-American residents face unique barriers to participation in the Census, in large part because of the historical circumstances under which the majority of its members immigrated.¹ In the latter decades of the twentieth century, more than 100,000 Cambodians arrived in the U.S. as refugees fleeing the Khmer Rouge’s systematic genocide of nearly one-third of the Cambodian population.² In addition to enduring extraordinary violence and trauma, the majority of these immigrants lacked formal education and thus have encountered structural and systemic difficulties learning English, obtaining professional degrees or licenses, or generating wealth for themselves and their families.³

¹ Institute for Asian American Studies. (n.d.). Data for Cambodian Americans in Lowell, 2010-2014. Retrieved December 10, 2019, from https://www.umb.edu/iaas/census/acs/data_for_cambodian_americans_in_lowell.

² Chan, S. (2015). Cambodians in the United States: Refugees, Immigrants, American Ethnic Minority. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-317>

³Id.

These effects reverberate throughout the Cambodian-American community today. As of 2017, 35% of Cambodian-Americans speak English less than “very well” and 31% have not graduated high school.⁴ Moreover, because of their experience under a repressive government, many Cambodian-Americans still report deep mistrust of government institutions.⁵ Taken together, these facts demonstrate both the enormous difficulty of counting the full Cambodian-American community in cities like Lowell as well as the community’s urgent need for the full federal resources and political representation provided by an accurate count. In refusing to offer telephonic and internet access to Census 2020 in Khmer, the Bureau is all but ensuring that the Cambodian-American community will be dramatically undercounted.

We therefore urge the Bureau to provide the Internet Self-Response and the telephonic Census Questionnaire Assistance in Khmer, as previously requested by both Senator Markey and Representative Trahan.⁶ If the Bureau chooses not to do so, it should at least extend grant funding or other financial assistance to vetted, long-standing community groups such as CMAA that can provide language assistance to the Cambodian-American community.

We would be happy to discuss this request in further detail. Please contact Lauren Sampson at lsampson@lawyersforcivilrights.org or at 617-988-0609.

Sincerely,



Iván Espinoza-Madrigal, Esq.
Oren Sellstrom, Esq.
Lauren Sampson, Esq.
Lawyers for Civil Rights

cc: Representative Ayanna Pressley
Representative Jim McGovern
Representative Lori Trahan
Senator Elizabeth Warren
Senator Ed Markey
Regional Director Jeff Behler
Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Greater Lowell

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

⁵ Lai, E. Y. P., & Arguelles, D. (2003). *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity & Change in the 21st Century*. San Francisco: AsianWeek, with UCLA’s Asian American Studies Center Press, in cooperation with the Organization of Chinese Americans and the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development. Retrieved from <http://www.asian-nation.org/cambodian.shtml#sthash.Y7k5JrVe.dpbs>

⁶ Edward Markey, Letter to US Census Bureau re Languages, July 8, 2019; Lori Trahan, Letter to US Census Bureau re additional Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong translation support for Census, June 7, 2019.