Road to Readiness Learning and Evaluation Memo

Jan 9, 2020

Road to Readiness Overview

The US Census serves as a fundamental building block for our democracy with direct implications for our state's representation at the federal level as well as the allocation of billions of dollars of federal funding for critical public programs. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, the census could miss more than 1.6 million residents in the state without a concerted effort to reach hard-to-count populations.[1] In response to advocacy efforts highlighting the critical importance of an accurate count, the state of California has made an unprecedented investment of $187 million to support census outreach across the state.

With more than 10 million people, Los Angeles County is larger than 42 other states and has been designated as the hardest to count region in the nation. More than half of the County's population is comprised of hard-to-count and with 88 municipalities, 140 unincorporated areas and more than 200 languages, the complexities of coordination are extraordinary.

Since 2017, the California Community Foundation (CCF) has been working with various partners to ensure a complete 2020 Census count by promoting coordination and mobilizing regional infrastructure across Los Angeles County. In 2018, CCF supported the establishment of the Los Angeles Regional Census Table (LARCT) in partnership with the Census Policy and Advocacy Network (CPAN) which was further expanded in 2019 to include 6 regional co-conveners serving census tracks with the highest concentrations of hard-to-count (HTC) populations. Together with the State of California (California Complete Count Office) and other funding partners, CCF has pooled funds and is working closely with community organizations to identify needs, fill gaps, and coordinate efforts.

This learning memo is part of an evaluation of *We Count LA* outreach efforts and has two primary purposes. First, it is designed to document insights and lessons from early planning efforts on the "road to readiness." Second, it seeks to lift-up key considerations and gaps as partners pivot from planning to Census implementation. It is based on initial conversations with the steering committee and interviews with the six regional conveners during the fall of 2019. Without question, early planning and collaboration have established a solid foundation for the road ahead. We start by lifting-up three of the most time-sensitive needs as Census partners and grantees shift to implementation, followed by effective strategies from the planning phase that should be carried forward.

1. **Strategic Coordination:** As more organizations and entities engage in outreach and work intensifies leading up to Census 2020, there will be an increased need for strategic coordination that goes beyond sharing updates and strategies. What that level of coordination will look like and how it will be operationalized is not yet clear. Regional leads stressed the importance of regional meetings that use data to guide real-time decision-making and strategic coordination. The pace and format of these meetings may vary by region, but overall stakeholders would benefit from shorter in-person meetings to strategize.
2. **Data Tracking and Use:** Grantees require simple and reliable data tools to track, monitor and adapt their outreach strategies in real-time. An immediate need is setting clear expectations and shared understanding on the data tools, systems and data elements that will be used, and who/how data will be tracked and monitored. Technical assistance and training will be needed given the

[1] https://www.ppic.org/publication/californians-and-the-2020-census/

range of experience with data tools like SwORD, PDI and Action Builder. Co-conveners are concerned about their capacity to lead this level of technical assistance.

3. **Communications Management:** Regional leads appreciate the communications materials developed by Fenton Communications and the ability to adapt them for local efforts and specific populations that goes beyond the "We Count Los Angeles" frame. However, there is a lack of resources for printing and translating materials and messaging into more languages. There are also efforts underway to ensure materials and media are translated into multiple languages, but there are still concerns about the lack of resources to print and distribute materials as well as how to ensure a unifying message as new entities enter the fold.

> **"Not only are we getting to understand the Census information - which is the unifier for everyone - The win is having people grow the sense of [community]. And it's been and has by virtue of this table." - Regional lead**

Creating a Strong Foundation: Effective Strategies and Early wins

On the road to readiness, steering committee members called out several characteristics and practices that have been instrumental during the planning phase and should be carried forward with the transition to implementation.

- **Community-driven and asset-based planning and grantmaking:** CCF has taken a collaborative and participatory approach to engage CBOs in planning for Census 2020. As a result, CBOs had the opportunity to help shape community-driven planning efforts as well as ensure CCF's grantmaking is timely, responsive, and strategic. This approach leverages deep knowledge at the community level, particularly in census tracts with high HTC populations.

> **"I worry because the county, the city, the state, and then there is private interests. The message is everything. Controlling the message is going to be key. Being part of the LARCT, we have the opportunity to do that." - Regional lead**

- **Centralized communication and coordination have increased awareness, commitment and collaboration:** Having a centralized body (CCF and the steering committee) has made communication more efficient, saving time, helping partners understand the political landscape, and providing regular updates about what's going on at the state and county level. Regional meetings have helped bring a unified sense of purpose and commitment among organizations. All regional leads noted stronger relationships between community-based organizations and other stakeholder groups. One shared that the LARCT has "helped build new relationships with groups we're not familiar with…relationships that could continue on after this. It has helped built political capital in the relationship." Another shared, "we have been able to communicate, and empower, our CBOs, our non-profits, our schools, our leaders, how important the census is and why we should all be united and working together… seeing how everybody wants to work and encouraging each other to apply for the outreach census funding, that has been amazing."

- **The LARCT has created a forum to learn and share strategies as well as elevate the credibility of community-based organizations:** The LARCT has created valuable space for information sharing, contributing to referrals, network building, and rich discussions about strategies and outreach tactics. A few regions have also begun landscape analyses to take stock of the organizational assets and gaps in their respective regions. Several participants shared how the LARCT has helped legitimize the value of their community-driven efforts, capturing the attention of public sector partners and elected officials. Several co-conveners mentioned how being leads has helped elevate their credibility in their community.

- **Trust and transparency**: Several participants talked about the importance of trust, transparency and relationships – all highlighted as enablers that will contribute to coordination and collaboration during Census implementation. That said, they also expressed concern about how they would begin to build trust with new organizations that are joining Census efforts, particularly as the implementation phase is fast approaching. Some regional leads describe the important role co-conveners play in building trust and providing the space where partners feel safe sharing.

Pivoting to Census Implementation

As partners and grantees shift to implementation, adjustments to the infrastructure will needed to accommodate the growing number of organizations joining on Census outreach efforts. This section focuses on key considerations as stakeholders pivot to the implementation phase.

1 Strengthening Coordination

Participants recognize the daunting task of coordinating efforts, messaging, and expectations across diverse stakeholders and organizations working at the state, county, and regional levels. As one steering committee member noted, "there will be more cooks in the kitchen," and the timeline is only going to get more and more urgent." Given the number of players and organizations involved in this work, communication needs to be as seamless and clear as possible to avoid confusion in the community. One regional lead suggested having a clear "road map" to align partners so that everyone understands the "diversity of the work" (i.e., communications, data, trainings, capacity building, reporting). As more organizations are coming into the fold, regional leads are concerned about alignment on different levels (between existing LARCT members and Round 1 and 2 grantees). Specifically, they are grappling with how to address overlapping efforts and how to bring new organizations into the regional coordination, particularly between grantees and non-grantees as well as with public sector efforts (i.e. cities, County, school districts). Specific suggestions and considerations to strengthen coordination are highlighted below.

"Once we enter January, the conversations are going to shift to troubleshooting. We need to take it to next level and not just say what you're going to do, but actually sit down and fill out calendars." - Regional lead

- **Continue to convene partners to optimize strategic decision-making.** Participants find value in regional meetings that strengthen coordination, peer learning and strategy discussions. To effectively engage grantees during the implementation phase, meetings will need to shift from general updates to strategic conversations about who is doing what and where, opportunities to leverage and partner with organizations during outreach, and troubleshooting when things don't go as planned. Some suggested simple tools, such as calendars and mapping. The goal of mapping exercises is to better coordinate, avoid overlap, and deploy resources where they are most needed. Specifically, each region (perhaps sub-regions in some of the larger regions) would benefit from technical assistance on how to use the response data in real-time through mapping exercises to inform their ongoing outreach strategies. Finally, another idea was to identify topic areas that are likely to be of interest and value to partners.

- **Recalibrate the format and pace of regional meetings during implementation**. Overall, regional leads suggest shorter (1-2 hours) in-person meetings where strategic conversations and coordination can take place. While conference meetings (Zoom) were helpful during the updates in the planning phase, several shared this would not be a helpful platform for strategic decision-making. Timing and pace of meetings depends on the emerging regional needs during implementation and partner commitments. For some, meeting once a month would be a burden given other community meetings. The cadence and structure may vary by region. Critical considerations to determine this include (1) the strategic purpose for meeting during the implementation phase, (2) how often and in what format real-time data will be available to use at region and sub-region level, (3) who will facilitate these strategic discussions, and (4) the needs and bandwidth of organizations to meet either in person or via a virtual format.

2 Data Gaps and Capacity Needs

Grantees and partners have many concerns about data collection, reporting, and data use. They also feel a sense of urgency as organizations are implementing their own systems and tracking data in ways that may be different from what the State might want. While they'd like to be consulted on these decisions, they are also looking for clear direction (presumably from the State) sooner rather than later. They identified several issues that require resolution.

- **Regions need a clear understanding of data systems, tools, and management.** Regional leads were unsure what data systems were required by grantees and what type of data would need to be collected, by whom, and how often. While there have been some initial conversations about the use of SwORD and mapping, the lack of clarity about how this is operationalized is causing concern among leads who feel this should have been figured out months ago. Some partners have ideas about data that will be meaningful and strategic to collect but are not sure if the funder is on the same page. Ideally, all regions should be using the same data categories to allow for broader analysis. One partner said it would help to have a template of standard and systematic data that should be collected to help ensure everyone is tracking data in a way that can be aggregated. Some leads shared concerns about data privacy. They want clarity about who has access to data, who will use it, for what purpose, and how to communicate this to their communities.

- **Reliability and utility of data tools and systems.** Grantees and partners are concerned about ease of use, noting complicated systems effect the likelihood that stakeholders will use it, resulting in less reliable data. They anticipate that regional leads might be the "first responders" if anyone has challenges with data tracking or issues using a system. There is also the issue of non-grantees who are "off the grid" and how to bring them to the table to share data. One regional lead asked, "How are different organizations and entities collecting or tracking the type of outreach that they're doing? It's just going to get bigger. And we know that right now, folks have already started implementing the work. But the concern is once you're deep into implementation and when it comes time to pivot on a data collection tracking perspective, it can be very startling." Additionally, there is concern about the frequency of data reporting. While it may be easy to enter data, it can also be time-consuming for grantees. As one regional lead noted, "it's a real problem for organizations that are stretched thin. Not as much about the platform, but more how you operationalize it. I wonder about grantees' bandwidth to implement it."

- **Mapping capabilities, and non-response information to inform outreach strategies**. Regional leads expressed the need for an easy-to-use tool that can track and map outreach efforts. For example, which census tracts are covered, what people are in those tracts, what tactics are being used, and then response rates to inform follow-up outreach. Grantees want to "visually see where folks are" on maps and use that information to target outreach. They have the expectation that the State would provide that information and are still unclear about what type of data will be available to them.

> "Ease (in data platform) is huge because there will be many people entering data. Ease would ensure accuracy of the data and minimize the need for technical support. No matter what the tool is someone is going to have trouble with it because of lack of familiarity with technology."
> – Regional Lead

- **Data sharing**: Partners envision the use of data systems that can talk to each other. Understanding that organizations will be using different means to track data, they want a system that can take data from different platforms and aggregate them to allow for broader analysis. One person asked about the possibility of having a system that could import secondary data so that they could do some analysis, and goal setting. He also thought this might incentivize organizations to use the system. Another regional lead mentioned that Action Builder is working on a connector tool so that systems can talk to each other but cautioned that is an "entire project onto itself."

"We are making the assumption that everyone will know how to use the [data] system, and then how to react in a timely manner with potential limitations and resources. There are so many layers of that in terms of technology, its understanding usage and how. Can the regional table play a role in how to support the organizations but do it in a way that is timely versus after the fact?" – Regional Lead

- **Capacity building and technical support:** Regional leads understand that it's not just about being trained to use the system but also includes understanding how to use and interpret data points for real-time decision-making. One partner noted the useful role Advancement Project played during the 2010 Census, in which they convened conference calls to support data use and interpretation. This maybe a useful practice for Census 2020, either via a virtual format or as part of appropriately timed regional meetings. There is also the consideration that grantees have varying capacity-building needs. Some may be using their own data spreadsheets and not as likely to adopt an entirely new system. One regional lead shared, "Some of the smaller agencies will be challenged. Getting them up to speed and training them will take time. Not just how to use the software, but also how to operationalize it in coordination with what's happening in the field."

3 Communications supports and collateral

Participants shared a range of resources and communications material that would be helpful as the outreach activities commence. Some suggestions include:

- Printed materials in various languages, especially for smaller non-grantee organizations who would like to support the census work. Printed materials include flyers and even lawn signs.
- Printed and television media for API and other non-Latino immigrant groups who may not have a strong radio infrastructure.
- More community-based assistance centers and/or kiosks to support elderly and other individuals with limited technological capacities. Kiosks can also serve as advertisement for the Census.
- Translated materials to be provided? during regional meetings to engage more diverse stakeholder groups.

Concluding Remarks and Ongoing Learning

The key themes and takeaways in this learning memo reflect both the early achievements and key issues from the LARCT regional leads as they begin to pivot from the census planning to implementation phase. The evaluation team will continue to document and surface effective strategies, enablers, and barriers as countywide census efforts continue to unfold. In addition to the "road to readiness" interviews in this brief, we conducted an online survey of both grantee and non-grantee partners. The results of this survey were shared in late 2019 and will be used to support ongoing coordination, data capacity, communications, and outreach efforts.

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