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Census months away, but promoting begins in NJ

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The Associated Press

CAMDEN, N.J. - Census forms won't be sent out until March, but the government has already begun the push to try to get them all filled out.

On Tuesday, officials came to Camden , a city where the Census Bureau considers every neighborhood hard to count , to woo help from nonprofit groups.

Fernando Armstrong, director of the Census Bureau's Philadelphia region, told a few dozen people from the organizations that they could be a key to getting an accurate count because they already have the trust of people who might be wary of giving the federal government any information.

"It is our commitment this time around that were are going to do everything we can to make sure we have a complete and accurate count," he said.

The Census numbers are important because they're used to determine Congressional and state legislative districts and how government money , including some \$400 billion per year from the federal government , is allocated.

The agency is trying to form "Complete Count Committees" in cities and towns across the country and asking them to hold events like parades to get attention and participation.

At Tuesday's event, like others taking place across the country, nonprofit leaders were plied with Census swag , water bottles and tote bags , to remind them to promote being counted.

Armstrong stressed that every home next year will get only a short form that should take less than 10 minutes to fill out. It is to be sent in both English and Spanish in places like Camden where

there's a high concentration of Spanish-speakers, and it will be available in other languages.

He said he plans to hire workers to talk about the census at tables set up in places like churches and grocery stores.

Samanatha Martinez, who works at the Hispanic Family Center of Southern New Jersey, said her group talks about the importance of the census in the civics classes they offer people attempting to become U.S. citizens. She said she's working on finding other ways to encourage participation.

A \$300 million campaign to promote the census to the public is scheduled to start in January.

In 2000, the Census bureau tallied 281.4 million nationwide. The bureau says it missed millions of residents, but double-counted even more for a net overcount of about 1.3 million people. But it's believed that the population in many cities was undercounted.

Studies have found that those most likely to be missed in the tally include African-American men between 18 and 38, Latinos and Asian-Americans, especially from countries where there's no census or it means something different than it does in the U.S.

A city where 79,904 people were counted in 2000, Camden is well-represented by all those groups.

Mayor Gwendolyn Faison said Tuesday that she's heard about fires in single-family houses where as many as 42 people were living. She said she doubts those homes were counted completely.

Census numbers present Camden as a tough place.


One report released earlier this year found that in 2007, the city had the third-lowest median household income , just over \$25,000 , among all cities with more than 65,000 residents and the second-highest poverty rate , nearly 2 in 5.

But Stephen Singer, executive director of CamConnect, a nonprofit that gathers data about the city, said that there's one statistic that could improve the city's image, and a full count would help: the overall population.

If it rises , or dips only a bit , it could be seen as a sign that residents are not continuing to flee the city.

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