

Voices for VI Children

Daily News, The Avis – April Op-Ed column, Judith Richardson, columnist (*photo on file*)

Title: ***Leaders: Take Steps to Ensure our Youngest Kids are Counted in the Census!***

With all due respect to the Nickelodeon network's feisty young heroine, Dora the Explorer, she can't "do it alone."

She's going to need help from government officials, civic organizations, and child advocates, to prevent a miscount that could cost the US Virgin Islands tens of millions of dollars and undermine efforts to address a range of crucial challenges.

Earlier this month, Nickelodeon and the U.S. Census Bureau teamed up to launch the "Children Count Too!" campaign, which will feature Dora in TV and radio spots, web links, posters, and informational leaflets this spring, to encourage participation in the 2010 census.

Of all the strategies being employed by Washington this year to promote the census, the "Dora" campaign is one of the few focused specifically on infants, toddlers and pre-kindergarteners. And that's a shame.

According to the Census Bureau's own analyses, the 2000 national census count missed more than 750,000 children ages 0 to 4 – a 4 percent undercount – by far the largest of any age group. The estimated undercount of preschool children in 1990 was nearly identical – 3.7 percent.

Failing again to count young children accurately in 2010 would mean the USVI will be penalized in two ways. First an undercount would deprive the local government of critically-needed revenues at a time of severe fiscal strain -- reducing the funding available for Head Start, food stamps, foster care subsidies, children's health insurance, Medicaid, highway construction, school aid, and much more.

Overall, \$450 billion dollars in federal support is distributed annually through programs that use Census data to determine state and local funding allocations – about \$1,500 for every man, woman and child nationwide. While these formulas affect different regions differently, it's safe to assume that every resident not counted in the census costs his/her state or territory hundreds of dollars per year in lost federal revenue. For the Virgin Islands, a 4 percent undercount of very young children in 2010 would mean about **6,000** uncounted youngsters – potentially resulting in \$9 million in lost revenues each year, and \$90 million in lost revenues over the next decade.

Why are we so inept at counting young children? Primarily, because young children are much more likely than other age groups to live in households with characteristics associated with low response rates on the census: poverty, belonging to an ethnic or racial minority, very large family size, and a non-native and/or non-English speaking head of household. Nationwide, children under age five are 23 percent more likely than the remainder of the population to live in areas the Census Bureau has designated as "hard-to-count."

Fortunately, there's still time for Virgin Islands leaders to step in and boost the count of our youngest children. The best way leaders can do this is to team up with the USVI's Complete Count Committee, and reach out to service providers who routinely interact with young children and their parents.

- Furnish local providers of the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program with materials about the census for participating low-income pregnant women and new mothers.
- Work with Head Start providers to furnish the parents of enrolled children with information about the census and to encourage participation.
- Look up and provide census-related information and resources to all licensed child care facilities in our jurisdiction.
- Work with our hospitals to encourage all women who have given birth recently to record their new babies in the census.
- Provide community clinics and pediatricians with census-participation materials to display in their waiting rooms and to distribute to parents.

If children aren't counted accurately, the USVI will be forgoing a clear picture of our territorial community, and we will be giving up our fair share of available federal funds in this hour of need. Dora can help, but they're our children, and we need to get counting!