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July 14, 2015

Karen Humes  
Bureau of the Census  
Department of Commerce

Dear Karen Humes,

Common Cause Oregon submits this comment in response to the Census Bureau's federal register notice regarding the Residence Rule and Residence Situations, 80 FR 28950 (May 20, 2015). We ask that you count incarcerated people at their home address, rather than at the particular facility that they happen to be located at on Census day.

Common Cause is a nonpartisan not-for-profit public interest group that works to safeguard and improve the democratic process. The organization has a long history of leadership, both nationally and here in Oregon, in support of fair and democratic redistricting. In Oregon, we just helped pass state legislation to bring more public participation and transparency to the state's redistricting process. We've also been working to address the very problem you are considering now – the fact that counting prisoners where they are incarcerated serves to arbitrarily concentrate a large group of non-voters and thus skew the relative strength of voters.

By designating a prison cell as a residence in the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau concentrated a population that is disproportionately male, urban, and African-American or Latino into just 5,393 Census blocks that are located far from the actual homes of incarcerated people. When this data is used for redistricting, prisons inflate the political power of those people who live near them.

In Oregon, the Native American population is one population that has lost voting strength due to this distortion. With incarceration rates at more than twice the rate of White Oregonians, Native Americans make up 1% of the total Oregon population but 3% of the incarcerated population. For the most part, Oregon prisons are located outside of tribal areas so that that voting power of non-incarcerated Native Americans is diluted.

This distorting effect plays out not only between communities with and without prisons, but also within the communities where prisons are located. For instance, in Pendleton Oregon, the prison population at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution makes up roughly 28% of a single Pendleton city council district. Every 3 residents of that district have the political power of 4 residents in other parts of the city.

While Common Cause and others are trying to remedy this situation here in Oregon, it would be far better to resolve this through the Census Bureau's own process. This is too important an issue – getting at the heart of the one-person-one-vote principal – to address piecemeal, state by state.

We appreciate that you are looking into this matter and thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K Titus". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "K" and a stylized "Titus".

Kate Titus  
Executive Director  
Common Cause Oregon