

Counting on the census for services

by Sen. Ted Stevens

WASHINGTON, D.C. — We're observing another bicentennial across the nation, and this one has special significance for Alaska and Alaskans.

In Alaska, we're off to a head start in marking the 200th anniversary of our nation's census because the federal government has recognized the unique problems census takers face in counting Alaskans.

OPINION

Census questionnaires are already in the mail for the Delta region, the Seward Peninsula and Nome. The Bristol Bay area and Alaska's Interior should begin receiving their questionnaires soon. Later in March, the Census Bureau will begin counting in the Arctic Slope and Copper River areas, and then the Aleutians, Southeast Alaska, and Kodiak, and finally, in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau.

Since that first census in 1790 enumerators have gone door-to-door every 10 years. No other nation has a continuous census record to match ours.

The first census, which included the area from Maine to Georgia and the territories to the west which our fledgling nation claimed, was just under four million Americans.

In 1980, the final count was 226,545,805 people in our 50 states and territories. This year, the figure is expected to be more than 250 million.

Even so, because some people live in what others — but not Alaskans — call "inaccessible communities impossible for census takers to reach," experts think that the 1980 count was at least 2.2 million short of our actual population. That's 1 percent. But the experts also have determined that among minority populations, about 6 percent were not counted.

That's why the Census Bureau has developed special procedures to help ensure that Alaskans, even in our most remote villages, will be counted this time.

And it's vitally important that each and every Alaskan is enumerated. Let's look at some of the reasons.

The purposes of the census, as stated in our Constitution, are threefold:

- To provide the population counts needed to apportion seats in the House of Representatives.
- To determine state legislative district boundaries.
- To meet critical national data needs for the next 10 years.

The first two purposes are self-explanatory, and there's no question of their importance. But what does "critical national data needs" encompass? Why is it important? I'll share a few examples of the uses of census data and how we each could be affected individually:

- The allocation of funds from federal grant programs is tied directly into the census count. With our small state population, every person counts toward getting our share.

- Often it's census data that identify areas requiring energy assistance, child assistance programs and programs to stimulate economic growth or reduce unemployment.

- The enforcement of fair lending practices and the establishment of fair market rent values, along with the assessment of the need for developing or expanding low-income housing programs are other uses of census

information.

- The allocation of funds and the analysis of programs for American Indians and Alaska Natives depend on the census count, along with assessing the need for equal employment opportunity programs.

- The development of state and local government programs, such as those for the elderly and handicapped, social district boundaries and construction, the establishment of health facilities and vocational and occupational education programs, transportation systems, the development of new social service programs — all depend on census data.

- Assessing the adequacy of labor pools and projecting business and marketing trends through information on age groups and education and skill levels to help the private sector plan for intelligent and orderly growth can be accomplished through census

information.

Everyone of us, every Alaskan, is likely to be affected in some positive way by the results of the use of census data.

Census team leaders for Alaska trained for many months. They made contacts in rural communities, asking for candidates for local census-takers, so that the enumeration could take place before warm weather when many Alaskans leave their official residences to fish or hunt.

Team leaders, who oversee the enumeration of up to three villages, will visit each community to work with the census taker.

If the team leader determines that residents of smaller villages and surrounding areas can be enumerated in four days or less, the leader may stay in the village until the census there is complete.

For larger rural communities, the

team leader schedules a second visit to collect the census questionnaires, reviews the enumerators' work and completes any outstanding work.

In enumerating some of Alaska's Native people, the Census Bureau plans a mailout/mailback system. Census questionnaires will be delivered by the Postal Service for the residents to complete and mail back to the census Bureau. Census enumerators will make follow-up visits to those households that fail to return the form mailed to them, to see where they can help in completing the form.

The success of the census depends of every Alaskan. Inaccurate counts could curtail projects and cause lower funding for programs and services.

Often those who could benefit the most are shortchanged if they're not counted. But being missed in the census affects not only the people missed. Everyone loses if everyone is not counted.