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Mo. state demographer urges high census count

By LEE LOGAN
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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) -- Missouri's demographer said Monday that the state could keep all of its current congressional seats and secure more federal funding if more people fill out a census form next year.

Several population models have Missouri losing one of its nine seats in the U.S. House based on the projected results of the 2010 census. But state demographer Matt Hesser says local officials have to persuade only about 60,000 extra people to fill out forms to keep that seat.

Hesser spoke to the first meeting of the 26-member statewide Complete Count Committee, which was formed to work with local officials to publicize the census.

"To me, the margin is razor thin," Hesser said. "It's not a done deal by any means."

He said Missouri could benefit from two economy-related trends: more immigrants are returning to their home country and more people are leaving high-population areas on the coasts.

Besides congressional representation, about \$300 billion in federal funds are apportioned based on census figures. Hesser said that for every 100 people missed, Missouri could lose \$1 million in federal funds over the next decade.

Census forms will be mailed to houses next March, and census workers began canvassing neighborhoods this week to build an address database.

Officials will no longer use the "long form," which contained nearly 100 questions. Instead, people will receive a 10-question form that can be filled out in a few minutes.

Information formerly included on the long form will be compiled into a multiyear survey known as the American Community Survey.

If people don't receive a form at home, they can visit designated centers to pick up a form, or they can call a hot line to ask for a form.

"We want that big camera to take a picture of our country, and we want everyone to be in that picture," said Craig Best, the assistant director of the Census Bureau office in Kansas City.

Best said census information will not be used by any other governmental agency, including law enforcement.

According to one 2007 projection by Election Data Services, Missouri is two slots away - in 437th place - from retaining its ninth seat.

Legislation pending in Congress could bump Missouri up a spot. A bill passed by the Senate would permanently add two seats in the U.S. House, give a vote to the Washington, D.C., delegate and add a seat in Utah, which missed an additional district by about 875 people in its 2000 census count.

In 2000, 69 percent of Missouri households filled out census forms, which is just above the national average. Hesser said an increase in 1 percent or 2 percent could put Missouri over the top.

Areas with a lower response rate include the Lake of the Ozarks region and the inner cities of St. Louis and Kansas City.

Hesser said local officials should try to get forms from people who normally fear the government and who are isolated geographically or culturally. Those people could include college students, the homeless or those living in ethnic enclaves.

"That's a big hole in the population count," he said.

Because the census counts all people living in the U.S., both legal and illegal immigrants are included.

Anna Crosslin, president of the immigrant-advocacy group International Institute of St. Louis, said immigrants might be more fearful of government officials after lawmakers passed a tough immigration bill last year.

"You can't afford to ignore the undocumented," she said. "They could be the difference in that congressional seat."

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