

LWV believes that everyone counts



Rachel Poller

Everyone counts, so we all need to be counted.

The Constitution mandates a U.S. Census — that is, counting the entire population — every 10 years. Its purpose is to collect demographic information about everyone living in the United States. It tells us who we are and where we are going as a nation.

Yet many of us remain confused. Why is the census important, and what is our responsibility? The census informs for the purpose of billions of dollars of federal funding annually. This funding impacts housing, education, transportation, employment, health care and public policy.

The \$675 billion distributed annually to state, local and tribal governments is based on census numbers. According to www.census.nc.gov, North Carolina receives about \$16 billion annually in federal funding from census-guided programs. A single missed person costs the state about \$16,000 over the decade.

The census also impacts our congressional representation. The 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are apportioned based on census data. This fair apportionment promotes voter confidence in our democracy and increases voter participation.

Federal electoral districts are adjusted and redrawn based on where populations have increased or decreased. Each decade, some states gain seats and some lose.

North Carolina's population has increased by about 10% in the past decade to approximately 10.5 million. With a complete count,

we will probably gain a 14th seat in the House.

Responding to the census is mandatory and a civic duty. The questions asked are: name, age, gender, number in house, phone number, own/rent and race/ethnicity. Race and ethnicity information helps federal agencies monitor compliance with anti-discrimination regulations. There is no census citizenship question.

Completing the census takes a few minutes and may be done online anytime at www.2020census.gov. You may respond by phone at 844-330-2020 or 844-468-2020 (Spanish) or by paper questionnaire. Forms are available in 12 languages with support in 59 languages including American Sign Language, Braille and large print.

The 2020 census officially began in March, with more than 18 million households already responding. According to Chuck Megown, partnership specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau's N.C. Field Division, in 2010, North Carolina ranked 16th with a census completion rate of 74%. Our 2020 goal is 80% completion, and Henderson County, at over 30% on March 28, is one of the top responding counties to date.

Like many N.C. counties, Henderson has organized a Complete Count Committee. Jacob Compher, planner at the HC Planning Department, says the goal is to count every member of our population so that the county receives the funding and representation our community deserves.

By using trusted community voices, the committee hopes to interact with hard-to-count populations like immigrants and people experiencing homelessness.

Along with most Henderson County offices and county/municipal elected officials, the committee has collaborated with

Interfaith Assistance Ministry, Hendersonville Housing Authority, Hendersonville Rescue Mission, El Centro, Agri-Business Development, United Way, Thrive and the League of Women Voters.

Many people fear sharing information with a government agency, but federal law protects all individual responses. Information can only be released in a statistical nature that keeps individual data confidential. Responses cannot be shared with law enforcement, the IRS, courts or any individual for 72 years.

So what does the census have to do with the LWV? Founded to secure the vote for women, the league consistently works to promote the values and processes of our democratic government.

The league strives to ensure an accountable, representative and responsive government at every level, and so its members have long worked to encourage complete participation in the census. It is one of the many ways the league "empowers voters and defends democracy."

Facing this pandemic, we have all learned that accurate data is vital. Census information will determine the resources and representation we will receive for the next decade. If you haven't already, please complete the census and then spread the word by phone or social media about how crucial it is.

Completing the census allows us all to participate in planning for our future and preserving our democracy.

Rachel Poller is president of the LWVHC, which is committed to nonpartisan, civil discourse on public issues. This monthly column is designed to introduce your local LWV to the community. To learn more about LWVHC, please visit www.lwvhcnc.org and www.facebook.com/LWV/HendersonCountyNC/.