



SPEAK OUT

Playing By the Numbers

by Sheila Morago

Those of us who are involved in the Indian gaming industry live and die by our numbers. We count customers and jackpots, employees and machines. We rate our promotions by how many dollars they generate. Even before the Great Recession, we were focused on how to pump up our visitor numbers and how to convert these numbers into profitability. You could say that our industry lives and dies by our numbers.

But there is another set of numbers that is just as critical to the future of Indian Country – the U.S. Census Count. This year the U.S. government is taking the 2010 census count. Many people do not realize that the census is the basis for how more than \$1 billion dollars is distributed through Indian Country. The census converts directly into dollars provided to tribes to build tribal housing, construct and maintain roads, provide employment and training programs and provide for many other services. Whenever a tribal community is undercounted, that tribe loses out on its fair share of government funding. When many tribes are undercounted, all of Indian Country suffers.

During this Great Recession, when gaming revenues are down, we can ill afford to leave money on the table. And make no mistake. If we are undercounted, we are walking away from dollars that should be ours. Through gaming and other enterprises we contribute to the federal coffers and we are fully entitled to our fare share.

The problem is that, until the early 1960s, tribes were excluded from U.S. census counts so, fifty years later, we have no tradition of participating in the census. This needs to change and it needs to change now. Tribes should commit to a “Be Counted” campaign with the same intensity we mustered to get tribal people to register to vote and then to the polls. We need fast action. Help your community organize a census counting project. Call family members and encourage them to be counted. Meet with elders and help them fill out the census form. Explain that these numbers matter. The census is used to analyze the need for Head Start services and plan for facilities for tribal elders. Population figures and demographics are critical to spur economic development on tribal land. The census directly impacts non-profit organizations that benefit tribal members. And, numbers equal political clout because a state’s population determines how many seats it gets in the U.S. House of Representatives and therefore how much representation its citizens receive. Additionally, census numbers impact redistricting, which then directly impacts political representation.

Participating in the census takes very little time. All answers are confidential. By law, the Census Bureau cannot share your answers with any person or agency – not the I.R.S. or law enforcement or any tribal authority. There are 10 questions on the 2010 form, which should take about 10 minutes to answer. These questions are your name, sex, age, date of birth, race, number of people living in your household and whether you own or rent your home. The question of race is extremely important for Indian Country. Native Americans must mark their federally recognized tribal affiliation or the census form will not count toward the Native headcount. Please note that the census does not ask about the legal status of respondents or Social Security numbers.

Be counted! It takes very little time and almost no effort, but it makes an enormous difference for the next ten years. Help launch a “Be Counted” campaign. Encourage everyone to be counted so that the 2010 Census is a big win for tribes. The bigger our numbers, the better our lives.

To learn how to use the form, go to the web site <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/how/interactive-form.php>. ♣

Sheila Morago is Executive Director of the Arizona Indian Gaming Association. She can be reached by email at sheila.morago@azindiangaming.org.



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