

'LET YOUR VOICES BE HEARD'

It's vital for veterans to participate in the Census; their benefits and services depend on it

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI

The U.S. Census Bureau has something to say to the nation's veteran community: "Think of the 2020 Census as a mission-critical roll call to make your numbers known. Veterans benefit directly when their communities are counted correctly. Tell other veterans how the Census impacts services they rely on."

USAF senior master sergeant (retired) and veterans service officer Virginia A. Wimmer would like to emphasize that message. She's the deputy director of the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, which assists thousands of veterans and their family members each year.

"First and foremost, veterans should take part in the Census to be counted," Wimmer says. "It's important that our legislators know who we are, where we are and what we need, so they can appropriately allocate funding and resources to the communities where we live."

There are livelihoods at stake, Wimmer points out. Census data are used to guide the distribution of hundreds of billions of dollars in federal tax dollars, with veterans receiving a portion of that in a broad menu of earned benefits and quality-of-life dividends. In a real sense, the Cen-

sus ultimately funds veteran services, which include pension benefits and employment opportunities.

Pre-pandemic, Wimmer's office blanketed the county, spreading the word to veterans about the importance of Census participation. It hosted benefits fairs and employment fairs, had a presence at veterans events at VFW and American Legion posts, and visited college and university campuses.

Now, with such outreach prohibited, it has turned largely to video and audio conferencing as well as posters.

"Veterans love to tell war stories," Wimmer says, "but now they need to start telling Census stories. I think more veterans would participate if they heard from a prominent veteran at the front of this. Getting (retired four-star general) Colin Powell as a spokesman would be nice."

If Wimmer could speak directly to the millions of veterans in California, she would first assure them that the Census does not share personal information, a concern among many veterans, she says. Then she would urge, "Stand up, be counted and let your voices be heard." •



Virginia A. Wimmer, who served in the Air Force, now pilots veterans and their families to the services they need.
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