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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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**Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Governmental Operations
On the 2020 Census**

I am Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer. I thank Chair Fernando Cabrera and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify.

Not only is participation in the census required by law, a complete count in this year's census is critical to providing essential federal funding for services, products, and support. For example, every student not counted translates to a loss of \$2,700 in funding for New York's public schools. Multiply that by the city's more than 1.1 million public school students, and that's a forfeiture of almost \$3 billion over 10 years.

The census is also used to determine Congressional representation. Since 1940, New York has lost 18 congressional seats and we risk losing two more. The potential loss of a second seat will occur if as few as 50,000 people fail to respond to the census. With the added challenges of the novel coronavirus, it is paramount that complete and accurate data is collected.

Manhattan's decennial census in 2010 had a self-response rate of 66.2%, which was below the national average of 74%. This year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors, Manhattan's self-response rate is only at 62.5% as of the end of September 2020.

We cannot dismiss the fear and confusion that may have been fueled by concerns over whether the 2020 census would collect data on the citizenship status of residents (it doesn't). This was an anticipated challenge, and I thank the many community-based organizations that serve immigrant populations for their tireless census outreach and education efforts to counter misinformation among communities with high populations of undocumented residents.

Yet this year also poses a unique and entirely unanticipated challenge to getting a comprehensive count. Due to COVID-19, many Manhattanites have relocated outside of New York City. As a result, Manhattan census tracts that traditionally reported over 75% in response rates now hover around 50%. Examples include East Midtown and the Upper East Side.

To address this problem, over the summer, I mailed postcards to 240,000 Manhattanites who live in the lowest performing census tracts. The postcards were sent as first-class mail so they would get redirected to anyone who requested to have their mail forwarded. The postcard reminded

constituents who have temporarily relocated to fill out their census form using their Manhattan-based permanent address rather than responding with their current address.

To further amplify this message, in September, I bought ad space in the *East Hampton Star* to promote awareness of the census count to remind people to fill out their census using their permanent addresses.

Finally, my office coordinated with the NY League of Women Voters to send another census postcard mailing to 35,000 Manhattan voters who had requested June 2020 primary election absentee ballots to addresses outside of New York City. My hope is that, between targeting residents from community districts with the lowest response rates and registered voters who have relocated, we can capture as many additional census responses for Manhattan as possible.

In addition to reaching Manhattanites who have relocated, my office continues the important effort of promoting the 2020 census within the borough. Last year, I established the 2020 Manhattan Complete Count Committee to aid in the achievement of a complete and accurate census. Ahead of the census, our office gathered key stakeholders and provided them with support in the form of data presentation, trainings, and workshops.

My office's nonprofit, the Manhattan Action Fund (MAF), distributed grants to support community-based organizations in their census outreach efforts. In September 2019, the MAF, with my office's own money sourced from the city, awarded \$52,000 to 12 organizations. More recently in August 2020, with funding from the NYS Empire State Development Corporation, the MAF awarded \$215,000 to 15 additional organizations.

These grants enabled organizations to conduct in-person and virtual outreach through a range of activities, from outreach bike rides to educational events and social media blasts. Prior to the 2020 census, many of these organizations had already established trust with the populations they serve, offering culturally and linguistically appropriate services and programs that meet the communities' needs. My hope is that these trusted organizations' outreach efforts provided the necessary education and support to empower residents living in Manhattan's disproportionately undercounted neighborhoods to get counted.

I also like to think outside of the box. Over the course of four days in August, I visited barber shops, nail salons and beauty parlors, restaurants, and other small businesses to distribute personal protective equipment to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Along the way, I passed out thousands of Census Fortune Cookies. These treats contained "fortunes" printed in English, Spanish, and Chinese reminding people to fill out their census. My staff and I conducted these visits in neighborhoods up and down Manhattan, including East Harlem, Harlem, Washington Heights and Inwood, Upper East Side, Upper West Side, Lower East Side, Chinatown, and Roosevelt Island.

On September 28, through my office's Back to School Day of Action, I along with over 100 volunteers, staff, and interns distributed census information, 35,000 masks, and 9,000 hand sanitizers to over 3,000 parents at about 100 Manhattan public schools. Through this effort, we reached households who had not previously received a personal reminder about the census.

As we are all aware, a successful decennial census in the United States requires an all-hands-on-deck effort from the entire nation under normal circumstances. Yet, as of March we are most certainly not living under normal circumstances. With civic trust at a modern-day low and a historic pandemic disruption, it is clear we will need the help of every volunteer, non-profit, government agency, business, and corporation to pull off this year's census.

To this end, as the self-response portion of the 2020 census wraps up in mid-October in tandem with the deployment of enumerators, I tackled the key remaining obstacle to a complete and accurate census count—access to buildings. I worked with the U.S. Census Bureau to obtain building-level addresses that needed to be visited while communicating with real estate associations such as REBNY to ensure building management companies would allow enumerators into their buildings. With proper notification and support by property owners, we can finish strong and count every Manhattanite for the 2020 census.

I look forward to working with members of the committee to bring New York City closer to complete count.