October 1, 2008

The Honorable William Lacy Clay, Jr.
U.S. House of Representatives
434 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Clay:

The American Anthropological Association (AAA)—a professional organization of over 11,000 anthropologists that is committed to the promotion and protection of the right of people everywhere to the full realization of their humanity—is writing to ask that the House Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives take appropriate legislative action to (1) pressure the U.S. Census Bureau to refrain from classifying any speakers as “linguistically isolated” due to its inaccurate and discriminatory nature, and (2) to add a question concerning proficiency in languages other than English to the national census in order to arrive at a more accurate picture of language in the U.S.A.

Our association has previously raised these concerns with the U.S. Census Bureau, to which the bureau’s division chief of housing and household economic statistics, David Johnson, replied, “We are unaware of any federal legislative need requiring the assessment of proficiency in languages other than English.” Johnson’s response prompted us to bring this issue to your attention because there is a critical need for such data. Non-English language information will allow our schools, hospitals, military, and social services to effectively serve and tailor programs to meet the needs of our nation and its disparate communities. AAA asks that you and your colleagues on the subcommittee introduce legislation that will require the U.S. Census Bureau to obtain an accurate linguistic profile of our increasingly diverse nation while avoiding the use of misleading and discriminatory language.

In 1990 the U.S. Census Bureau began categorizing individuals and families as “linguistically isolated” if their household “is one in which no member 14 years old and over (1) speaks only English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English “very well” [Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3, Matrices P19, P20, PCT13, and PCT14]. The term “linguistically isolated” conveys the false and damaging view that people who do not speak English have no contact with English speakers. Moreover, the Census Bureau’s application of the term “linguistically isolated”
to all members of a family in which no one over the age of 14 speaks English “very well”
incorrectly categorizes the children in those families under the age of 14 who speak
English “very well.” The Census categorizes as “isolated” a small percentage of
American households where adults have some difficulty with English, not the great
majority in which no one speaks anything but English.

The Census does not ask about proficiency in any language except English, despite
multilingualism being a valued norm in most communities worldwide. A widespread and
growing English-only ideology, fostered by misinformation about the desire and ability
of immigrants to speak English, has led numerous states to declare English their official
language, effectively denying bilingual services and hindering bilingual education. There
is also increasing evidence of linguistic intolerance and linguistic profiling in housing,
employment, education, health, and child custody cases throughout the nation.

We urge you and the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National
Archives to take appropriate action that will ensure the Census includes a question about
proficiency in languages other than English, and stops classifying those who speak
English less than “very well”—and all members of their households—as “linguistically
isolated” because the term is inaccurate and discriminatory, and the classification
promotes an ideology of linguistic superiority that foments linguistic intolerance and
conflict.

Our Association would like to speak with your aide(s) who handles Census Bureau
affairs by the week of October 21st so that we can further detail our concerns. We will
contact you prior to that time to ensure that you have received our letter and are able to
discuss this important issue. We thank you for your prompt attention to this matter and
ask that you follow up with Mr. Damon Dozier, AAA Director of Public Affairs. He can
be reached at (703)528-1902 extension 3008 or ddozier@aaanet.org.

Sincerely,

Victoria Sanford
Chair, Committee for Human Rights
American Anthropological Association

U.S. House of Representatives
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