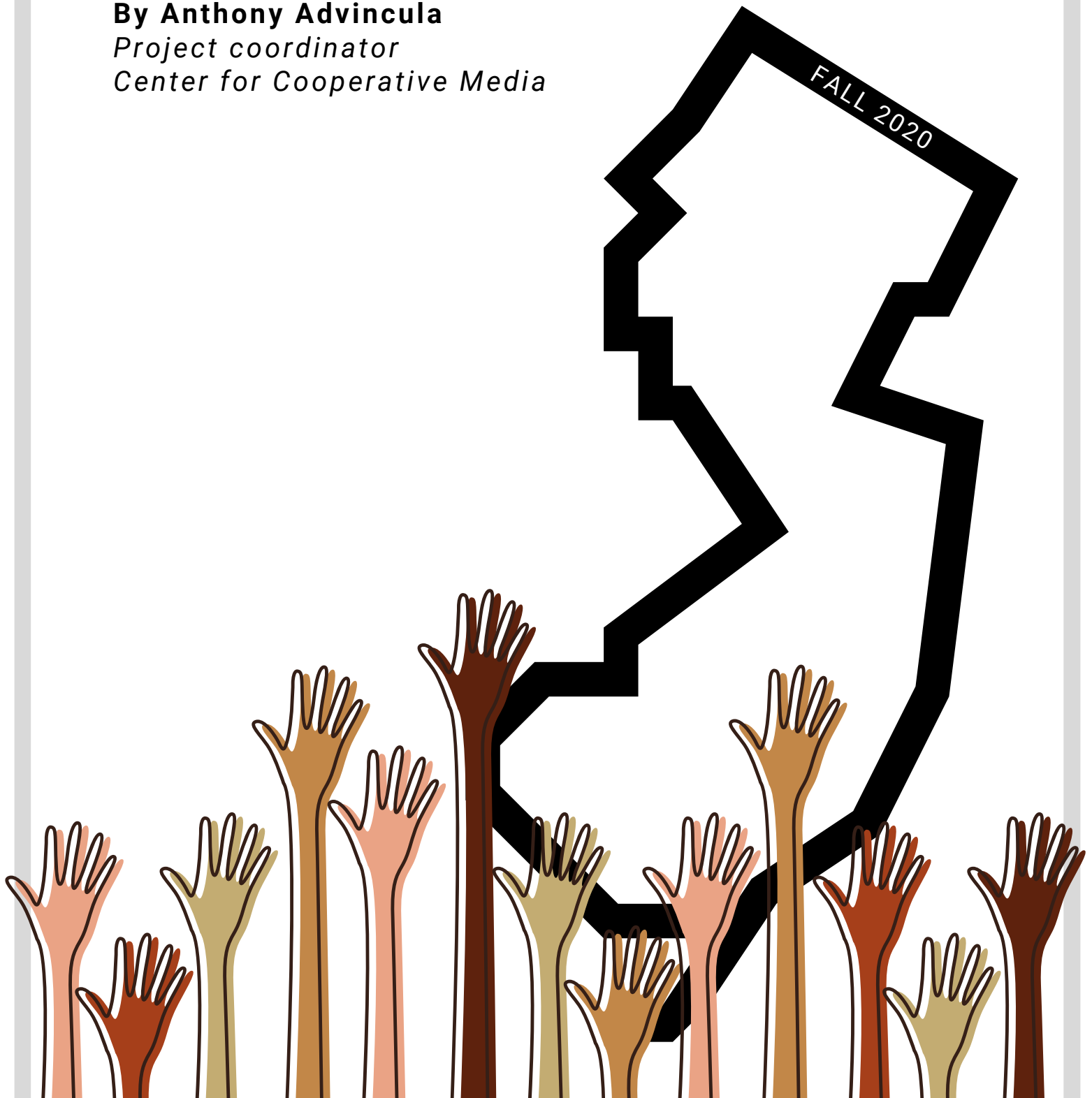


NEW JERSEY MEDIA COUNTS

By Anthony Advincula
Project coordinator
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About the Center for Cooperative Media

The Center was founded in 2012 in response to the downsizing of New Jersey news organizations and the changes in the ownership of regional public media. These shifts in the news and information landscape hurt the volume of local news available in a state that has historically had limited news coverage, due to its proximity to the major metropolitan areas of New York City and Philadelphia.

The Center coordinates statewide and regional reporting, connecting more than 280 local news and information providers through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons. The Commons helps partners to share content and encourages them to collaborate and to support one another.

The Center also conducts and publishes research on emerging ideas and best practices, focusing on local journalism, business models, and ecosystem mapping. The Center convenes national programs, including an annual national summit for journalism organizations to foster the conditions, ideas, and practices that lead to stronger collaborative journalism across the U.S. The Center's annual reports offer a detailed history of programs and impact.

The Center is a grant-funded program within the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. The Center receives core support from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Democracy Fund and the Abrams Foundation, as well as project support from many other grantmaking sources and sponsors.



About the author

Anthony "Oni" Advincula is a New York City-based journalist and communications consultant. Formerly the national media director, writer and editor for New America Media, he managed and organized ethnic media projects in 45 states. He was a correspondent for The Jersey Journal and the communications director and managing editor of the Independent Press Association-New York, where he co-edited Voices That Must Be Heard (now known as CUNY's Voices of NY).

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Introduction

New Jersey is one of most diverse states in the country. **Nearly one in four New Jersey residents is an immigrant** and nearly one in six is a native-born U.S. citizen with at least one immigrant parent, according to the latest census data. About 20% of the state's population is Asian, 14% is Black and 19% is Latino.

The **most diverse towns** in New Jersey include Paterson, Camden, Elizabeth, Jersey City and Atlantic City.

Yet, according to the **Advocates for Children of New Jersey**, those New Jersey towns are also among the hardest to count when it comes to the decennial census.

More than 30 percent of New Jersey's population lives in areas that are at risk of being undercounted or not being counted at all in the decennial census, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The state's immigrants and people of color are most in danger.

An analysis by **The Associated Press** and the **New Jersey Institute for Social Justice** showed that in Newark, 99.62% of the population lives in hard-to-count neighborhoods Atlantic City and Jersey City, that number is 98% and 80.12%, respectively.

Research shows that Latinos, African Americans, Asians, non-English-speaking immigrants and children under 5 are the hardest to count. This is particularly true in low-income communities with nontraditional or extended families, non-English-speaking households, people with informal living arrangements, and immigrant families with mixed immigration status.

Those challenges, experts say, have been compounded by the Trump administration's efforts to put a citizenship question on the census questionnaire, **impose a "public charge" rule** that could discourage undocumented immigrants or families with mixed immigration status from participating in the census and, most recently, **exclude undocumented immigrants** from the 2020 Census count for the purpose of congressional reapportionment.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the citizenship question and a three-judge panel in New York blocked the ban on undocumented immigrants from being counted, the damage was done; it's likely that many immigrants were scared away from participating in the decennial count.

Advocating for more media coverage

In the summer of 2019, the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University began an effort to boost the amount of media coverage of the census in hard-to-count New Jersey communities.

The Center is a grant-funded program based at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State. Its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism and support an informed society in New Jersey and beyond. The Center runs the NJ News Commons and serves as a central hub for local media in the state — especially independent, ethnic and nonprofit media — providing coaching, training, communication, networking, fellowship programs and more.

The Center's census work was spurred by conversations its team had with members of the Census 2020 NJ Coalition in regard to how local media — especially ethnic, community and in-language media — could be motivated to do more coverage of the 2020 Census.

The initiative began with a training and sourcing workshop for journalists about the 2020 Census, which was hosted on the campus of Rutgers University in Newark in August 2019. The workshop, organized by the Center, included several speakers and presentations from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Census 2020 NJ Coalition, along with two local journalists who had experience covering the census. About 50 people attended the event, including several reporters from ethnic media publications in New Jersey. The New Jersey training was based in part on a [national series of training workshops](#) led by the Poynter Institute and D'Vera Cohn.

The goal of the convening was to raise awareness about the 2020 Census — especially the timeline — and seed coverage ideas. Afterward, the Center worked with OpenNews to [publish a guide for other journalists](#) about how they could organize a similar training event. OpenNews arranged to provide small grants to help offset costs.

Following that event, the Center worked with one of its longtime funders, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, on a grant that would provide stipends to ethnic and community reporters for their work on census coverage. That grant also allowed the Center to hire Anthony Advincula to join the project as its coordinator.

By October, the Center was able to bring Anthony on for additional hours, thanks to support from Democracy Fund.

NJ Media Counts begins

Soon the Center announced its NJ Media Counts fellowship program, which provided support for 12 reporters and editors from New Jersey's ethnic media to produce in-depth stories about the challenges and opportunities of the 2020 Census in diverse communities — Gujarati, Turkish, African American, Hindi, Hungarian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Filipino, Chinese and Latino. Each fellow received a stipend for their participation.

The NJ Media Counts fellowship was intended to allow each reporter and editor from each community to decide what approach and information their community needed and structure their work accordingly. Especially in immigrant communities, understanding of the U.S. Census varies widely; in some cases, journalists felt their communities needed a basic understanding of what the census was; in other cases, journalists felt their communities needed persuasion on why participating would matter.



Turkish Americans, mostly heads of their families, attending a Census forum hosted by the Center for Cooperative Media and Turkish Center Center New Jersey.

Each fellow worked with Anthony to design their fellowship. Most of the fellowships included two-three stories that were produced about the Census between the late fall of 2019 and mid-2020. Several also included community forums that were organized in cooperation with other local stakeholders, beginning in late fall 2019 and lasting into early 2020.

“With the Center’s support, my census fellowship stories were published not only by The Korea Daily NJ-NY but also by other Korean publications in the U.S. and in South Korea,” said NJ Media Counts fellow Jongwon Lee, a reporter for The Korea Daily.

The novel coronavirus pandemic hit just as the last forums were wrapping up; the Center was not able to attend the last in-person forum one of its fellows hosted because of restrictions placed on employees of Montclair State. The final two forums were hosted virtually.

Most of the fellows had finished at least one of their stories and several had hosted a forum by April, right around when the Census Bureau postponed its field activities. Census Day was pushed back from April 1 to July 30. After that, fellows who were still producing content changed the focus of their second stories to examine the impact of COVID-19 and census postponements on hard-to-count communities.



The elephant in the room is that I also didn’t have to care about my foreign accent when I raised my hand and asked my questions!



Over the summer of 2020, it became clear that there was still a need to promote the Census. Response rates in key communities were low and the news was dominated by other topics, most notably the pandemic. And enumeration efforts, which kicked off in mid-March in New Jersey, had encountered a number of challenges, including households that did not open their doors because of COVID-19 or immigration-related fears.

For these reasons, in late summer 2020 the Center extended the reporting fellowship and provided a second round of funding and support to fellows so they could specifically

report on census response rates and enumeration initiatives. The Center arranged to host two virtual press-briefings with census sources on each topic so that the fellows could ask questions and start their initial reporting.

“The census telebriefing (was) an eye-opening experience for me,” said NJ Media Counts fellow Abu Taher, publisher and editor of Bangla Patrika and TiME Television, a Bangladeshi-language weekly and TV channel, respectively. “As a journalist, it has truly helped me understand the broad, nationwide perspective on the census, which enables me to tie it up with the specific nuances of the issue in the Bangladeshi community.”



Abu Taher (standing) of TiME Television and Bangla Patrika speaking to Paterson Councilmember Shahin Khaliq (middle) at a Bangladeshi community forum on March 12, 2020.

“Because of COVID-19, we have been stuck at home. But the CCM census fellowship, especially its online training and briefing, has been so valuable for me and my paper, providing us direct reporting while in quarantine. It has brought experts together all at

once,” said NJ Media Counts fellow Mohsin Zaheer, editor and publisher of Pakistani News, an Urdu-language print and online publication.

The fellowship extension produced about 20 more in-language and English stories, including [Hungarian](#), [Spanish](#), [Chinese](#), Gujarati, Tagalog and [Korean](#).

NJ Media Counts goals

Both rounds of the Center’s NJ Media Counts reporting fellowship aimed to inform, educate and promote 2020 Census participation and engagement in New Jersey’s vulnerable communities and most at-risk of being undercounted.

Specifically, the Center wanted to:

- Provide a new opportunity for journalists from ethnic media to cover the 2020 Census through the perspectives of the immigrant and people of color communities that they serve in the state.
- Expand and increase understanding of census issues, and therefore response rates, in hard-to-count communities by increasing local reporting.
- Collaborate with local community partners, including organizations that are a part of the Census 2020 NJ Coalition.

Findings and outcomes

As a result of the NJ Media Counts initiative, 40 original stories were produced and published in television, radio, online and print editions in 10 languages, including English, Spanish, Gujarati, Urdu, Chinese, Turkish, Tagalog, Bangladeshi, Korean and Hungarian. All of the in-language stories were translated in English, and then posted on the Center’s [NJ Media Counts website](#) and distributed via several newsletters.

In total, the Center distributed about \$35,000 in award stipends to support 20 fellows.

“The census project has allowed me to find and develop new sources and resources,” said NJ Media Counts fellow Kleibeel Marciano, editor and publisher, of Reporte Hispano, a Spanish-language biweekly print newspaper. “It has given me and my publication fresh ideas and information, which our readers need.”

Additionally, five of the fellows — in addition to their individual reporting projects — organized a four-hour, in-language forum on the census in the communities that each serve. Those forums were hosted for the Gujarati, Turkish, Bangladeshi, Latino and Black communities.

With the help of the Center's coordinator, the fellows looked for the most accessible venue (most of them took place in churches, senior and community centers and city council offices) and the right speakers, including community leaders who were known and trusted in their community. Each forum included partnerships with immigrant rights advocates, community organizations, academics, researchers and Census Bureau personnel. The forums on the census also resulted in a partnership with Councilmember Shahin Khalique, the first Bangladeshi American cabinet member in Paterson.

In total, six community forums were hosted:

- Gujarati community, Oct. 24, 2019, at the Iselin Adult Care Center. About 65 attendees. Forum was conducted in both English and Gujarati.
- Turkish community, Dec. 2, 2019, at the Turkish Cultural Center in Clifton. More than 70 attendees. Forum was conducted in Turkish and translated into English by community volunteers.
- Black community, Jan. 30, 2020, at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Atlantic City, N.J. About 60 attendees. Forum was moderated by a representative from the NAACP.
- Latino community, Feb. 13, 2020, at Make the Road New Jersey in Newark. More than 50 attendees. Forum was conducted in Spanish and translated into English by Make the Road NJ and Wind of the Spirit volunteers and staff members.
- Bangladeshi community, March 12, 2020, at the Office of Paterson Councilmember Shahin Khalique in Paterson. About 30 attendees. Forum was conducted by representatives from the Asian American Federation, and it was translated from English to Bangla.
- Black community, April 9, 2020, online meeting, About 20 attendees.

Through NJ Media Counts, the Center worked with 15 community groups across the state, including Advocates for Children of New Jersey, Asian American Federation, The Paterson Alliance, Wind of the Spirit, New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, NAACP Atlantic City, National Coalition of 100 Black Women South Jersey, Make the Road New

Jersey, Turkish Cultural Center New Jersey, Inspiring South Asian American Women, YWCA Northern New Jersey, and Iselin Senior Center.

The Center, along with the Census 2020 NJ Coalition, Advocates for Children of New Jersey and the Census Bureau, conducted five reporting training and seminars for the fellows to provide them the information that they could use to educate and engage their audiences about the census.



Gujarati residents listening to the census presentation during the forum.

“I was able to dig deeper about Census issues in my community without the staring eyes from mainstream journalists who’d cover it differently,” said NJ Media Counts fellow Laszlo Bartus, editor and reporter of *Amerikai Nepszava*, a Hungarian-language weekly. “The elephant in the room is that I also didn’t have to care about my foreign accent when I raised my hand and asked my questions!”

“It was very purposive, targeting the issues that we report on and the kind of information that ethnic communities need,” said NJ Media Counts fellow April Xu, reporter, *Sing Tao Daily*, a Chinese-language daily. “The initiative has provided me granular data on the

Chinese community, which I don't usually get from a general or mainstream-focused press conference.”

Measuring success

The NJ Media Counts initiative is measuring its success based on three primary success indicators, including the impacts of community forums, the scope of coverage and readership generated by each reporter's fellowship stories, and the diversity of audience reached in the state.

The census forums in Turkish, Gujarati, Black, Latino and Bangladeshi communities that the Center and ethnic media fellows organized in various parts of the state — including Iselin, Paterson, Newark, Atlantic City, Vineland and Elizabeth — provided an important and unique opportunity for members of these communities to gather and learn about the 2020 Census.



Latino residents in Elizabeth, N.J., participating in a census forum.

For many of these community members, most particularly newly arrived immigrants or those who originally came from countries that do not have decennial counting, the forums allowed them for the first time to hear what the census is about and how it could benefit their families and communities.

“It is remarkable to see about 75 people, along with community leaders and reporters in Atlantic City, all in the same room for the first time to talk about the 2020 Census,” said NJ Media Counts fellow Raymond Tyler, reporter and radio host, Shore Local News and 96.1 FM WTTH. “As a journalist covering the census, I learned a lot.”

Community leaders and grassroots partners in New Jersey proved to be the most effective and trusted communicators on census issues. And having census speakers and experts in the same room during these forums allowed ethnic media journalists to interact directly and confidently with them, asking nuanced questions and obtaining background information. The speakers, in turn, served as a news source and resource for the journalists.



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From the perspective of the speakers and experts of these forums — demographers, academics and advocates — it gave them a chance to get to know and draw a very diverse cross section of ethnic representatives and leaders to the table to hear from and exchange views with them. It also expanded their links to local ethnic media, which they find it difficult to penetrate.

“I am so glad we did this forum,” said Howard Shih, director of policy and research at Asian American Federation. “We have been trying to reach out to these

communities, but we have not had much luck. Now, they are all gathered in the same room. It’s wonderful to see them opening up their issues and concerns.”

NJ Media Counts also helped build cross-cultural alliances and strengthen the relationships and engagement between ethnic media, experts and academics. The Center was able to create deeper linkages and partnerships with other organizations, advocates, campaigns, and/or coalitions during the project.



Residents listening to a census presentation at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Atlantic City, N.J.

In terms of readership and coverage, the initiative was not able to track readership in a way that neatly tallies up total potential readership because of the differences between how each outlet tracks its audience. But an estimate can be made from looking at the coverage of the news outlets that each fellow worked for.

For example, *Reporte Hispano* distributes 45,000 print copies twice a week, and its online edition gets more than 100,000 page views a week. To add its readership on social media, particularly Facebook, the largest Spanish-language newspaper in the state has more than 250,000 readers a week.

Sing Tao Daily has a daily print circulation of 150,000 and more than 200,000 digital readers a day. The largest Chinese-language in the New Jersey area serves as the main source of information for Chinese immigrants.

The project was also able to reach hyperlocal ethnic communities. The Spanish-language publications have reached into multiple ethnic groups, including Mexicans, Hondurans, Peruvians and Salvadorans. There is a similar level of diversity in the Asian community: Chinese, Gujarati, Hindi, Filipino, Pakistani and Bangladeshi.

Challenges and limitations

The decennial census, even for veteran journalists who have been covering it for years, is a complicated issue to tackle. It requires more time, broader resources and, in most cases, more manpower to extensively look at the 2020 Census from various perspectives.

While NJ Media Counts fellows in New Jersey said they would have liked to cover more stories related to the census, limited budget operations and small staffs were a challenge for most of them. As a result, they tended to work on stories in which they had easy access to sources and information, which often relegated additional census coverage to a secondary priority.

Ethnic media reporters also found it challenging to access current data and facts by ethnic groups, if any existed, to help localize stories specifically to their communities.

For example, when Mohsin Zaheer started looking at the early response rate for Pakistanis in Paterson, such granular data about his community was not available.

Additionally, not all Census Bureau press releases or advisories are translated into every language. Laszlo Bartus, of Amerikai Nepszava, noted that some census terms in English are too technical for him to understand and thus made it difficult for him to translate these terms into Hungarian.

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Moving forward: The next steps

Feedback from NJ Media Counts fellows, community partners and local Census Bureau representatives indicated that the program was successful and all parties would like the work to continue in some way.

Ethnic media partners said they would like to see the Center continue to serve as an intermediary, connecting them with advocates and organizations working in the elections, racial justice, public health (COVID-19), voting rights, immigration and other issues that matter to their communities. Ethnic media reporters and editors also would like the Center to organize more press briefings exclusive for them, which gives them more sourcing opportunities for first-hand information specific to their audiences.

The biggest challenge to continuing the work is raising money to finance additional reporting fellowships or even social media or advertising-driven campaigns. Nearly every fellow said they would not have been able to participate had there not been funding made available.

The Center intends to continue nurturing all the partnerships built through the NJ Media Counts initiative, and intends to continue raising money to support additional press briefings, fellowship opportunities and more.

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