

Local officials want to focus on ethnic groups in Census

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript
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Monday was the official kickoff for the 2010 Census in Orange, Irvington, East Orange and elsewhere against the backdrop of Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the recent devastating earthquake that hit the island nation of Haiti last week.

Now, more than ever, city officials said the importance of every Orange resident and citizen being counted has shown itself. The fact of the matter, they said, is that a substantial portion of the city's population is of Caribbean descent, which includes Haiti.

As relief efforts in this country become more organized and intense, Orange Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. said he wants to make sure that no one is left out of the count.

"We must work very hard to ensure all our residents are counted," he said. "This will enable Orange to get its fair share of funding in the future. Last week's rally was the first of many events geared to help ensure our communities are properly represented with this Census."

Hawkins' message was not lost on members of the Haitian diaspora like Theyy Faustin, executive director of FamiCare in Irvington, who agreed the Census is an important tool for making sure the interests of the Haitian and other ethnic communities are represented. "In March and April we're going to be training people to go out into the Haitian community and encourage people to fill out the forms and get counted," said Faustin. "The official population numbers in Irvington is 61,000, and I would say that we make up roughly 40 percent of the population, but we have always been under-represented when it comes to the Census. We need to do something about that and we're taking steps to make it happen."

The rally Hawkins was referring to took place two weeks ago in Newark. It was organized by the New Jersey Urban Mayors Association and was attended by East Orange Mayor Robert Bowser and Irvington Mayor Wayne Smith.

The 2010 regional Census program launched its New Jersey Urban Initiative during the "It's In Our Hands Rally" on Monday night. The event was held in the African American Cultural and Educational Center in Newark.

Local officials and law enforcement members have said the Census also can have a "real life" impact within municipalities. In East Orange's case, the funding for much of the high-tech surveillance and communication equipment purchased to help reduce reported levels of crime came via population-based grants.

Because an accurate count is necessary to receive appropriate funds for law enforcement and other needs, Smith said area residents must return their forms once they receive them.

"There are just 10 questions on the Census this year. They simplified the questions to try and get people to send them back," said Smith. "Going door to door doesn't always give us the most accurate count, so we need people to fill out the forms they get in the mail and return them."