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July 30, 2010

The Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

I am writing on behalf of Community Development Halton (CDH) to express our astonishment and deep concern about the recent decision of your government to discontinue the mandatory long-form questionnaire for the 2011 Census in favour of a voluntary National Household Survey (NHS).

As a local community development and research organization, we know first-hand the importance of data emanating from the mandatory long-form census questionnaire in our work to enhance the quality of life of people as they live and work in local communities. It is the basis for foundational documents used throughout our community, such as CDH's Social Profile reports and Community Lens series that allow community organizations to evolve their services and activities to reflect their communities changing population.

In the past, data from the long-form questionnaire have been used to inform program and policy decisions in our community. The data allow us to ensure that program investments – often with federal money – are targeted toward the populations who need them the most. Moreover, comparing past census data with more recent census numbers allows us to see the changing nature of our communities, as well as analyze and evaluate the responsiveness of programs and services. For example, census data for our community shows us where newcomers are locating, thus allowing settlement services to be offered in those areas.

Census data provides some of the most reliable socio-demographic data at the neighbourhood level. Sample bias inherent in a voluntary survey such as the proposed National Household Survey (NHS) cannot replace the quality of Census data. In our experience over many decades in our local communities, we have never been made aware that local citizens resented the time needed to respond to the survey nor that they believed their privacy was being invaded. Quite to the contrary, grass-root community groups have been pleased and grateful to have access to quality data that provide insights on their communities so that as citizens they can engage in responsible and informed decision making on local issues.

I recognize that your government is proposing changes that would see a long-form questionnaire (the NHS) distributed to more homes across the country, but completing it becomes voluntary. The

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voluntary nature of the new form will compromise the quality of the data and will not accurately reflect the socio-economic or population diversity demographics that community organizations and local government use to shape their programs. By changing the form, long-term comparisons of census data, vital to trend analysis and planning will no longer be possible. Census data is a critical building block of public and community programs as they are informed by local demographics. Census data provides quality information to guide community dialogue and citizen engagement on important social and economic issues facing a community.

Community Development Halton urges the Government of Canada to reconsider their recent decision on the 2011 Census long form questionnaire so that citizens will have the information they need to be active and responsible. In particular, CDH supports the recommendations of the National Statistics Council to a) reinstate the 2011 mandatory long-form questionnaire as is for this cycle; b) engage in a formal consultation process to examine Census questions, beginning with the 2016 Census, and; c) adjust penalties for non-compliance by eliminating the threat of a jail sentence for not filling out a census form.

Sincerely,

Laila Eiriksson
President

cc.

The Honourable Tony Clement, Minister of Industry Canada
The Honourable Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Official Opposition (Liberal Party of Canada)
The Honourable Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada
Gilles Duceppe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
The Honourable Dalton McGuinty, Premier of Ontario
Lisa Raitt, M.P. (Halton)
Mike Wallace, M.P. (Burlington)
Terence Young, M.P. (Oakville)
Michael Chong, M.P. (Wellington-Halton Hills)
Gary Carr, Chair, Regional Municipality of Halton