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## Snowbirds vital to 2010 census

### IN OUR WORDS

In a matter of months U.S. Census Bureau employees will be canvassing Lapeer County households as they conduct the 2010 census. It's sort of the equivalent of the so-called fourth Friday count in Michigan when a student head count is taken to determine how much state aid funding local districts will receive from the state.

This count is even more important.

Census questionnaires will be mailed out in March, at which time the forms will ask households for information accurate to their home as of April 1, 2010. Census officials said the 2010 census uses one of the shortest forms in its history — only 10 questions that they say can be completed in about as many minutes.

The 2000 census indicated Lapeer County was home to 87,904 residents.

So why all the hype now for something that doesn't really get started until the spring?

Because an accurate and full census count is important to future federal — as well as state — spending as it relates to the return of tax dollars to Lapeer County for such things as roads.

And also because it's early December and some Lapeer County residents are making their plans to leave for Florida or other warm-weather destinations for several months. Lapeer County's and Michigan's snowbirds are being asked to take one more thing along with them when they're packing to head south for the winter.

That's the message from officials with state and local governments and area agencies on aging, who are trying to educate snowbirds about the importance of making sure they are counted as Michigan residents when census forms are delivered to households in late February and March.

Lt. Gov. John Cherry, who is heading the state's census count effort, said the state estimates about 200,000 snowbirds were missed or not counted as Michigan residents in the 2000 census. He said the uncounted snowbirds contributed to the state's loss of a seat in Congress and about \$2 billion in federal funds over this decade.

Population counts also affect federal dollars that come to the state for hospitals, schools, senior centers, public works projects and emergency services.

State, local and Area Agency on Aging officials said it's critical that Michigan have an accurate tally of its population in the decennial count to receive federal dollars that are directly tied to population and to maintain political influence in Washington on issues such as the auto industry, health care reform and the Great Lakes.

The census form asks people to list who is living or staying at "this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1" of the census year. Since most snowbirds are at their winter home then, they might complete the form listing their southern residence, rather than their home in Michigan, state officials said.

While census officials acknowledge the counting process "isn't perfect," they add the bureau has checks in place designed to ensure everyone is counted properly. These checks include visiting addresses where forms have not been returned, surveys to validate data and samplings of occupied and vacant addresses to verify information.

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There have been changes since the 2000 census to help with a more accurate count, such as more information about the census being shared on the internet and through e-mail and social networking sites. He said Michigan received federal stimulus money to hire four to five times more census staffers to go into areas known for having low returns or being difficult to get counts.

Those who live in Lapeer County the majority of the year — but are in their winter residence in another state when census forms are mailed in March — should follow these guidelines to be counted as Michigan residents:

- Zero should be entered on the form received at the second residence as the number of people residing there. The rest of the form should remain blank. Also write "usual residence elsewhere" on the form so the census bureau will know why zero was entered.
- If other people are staying in the Lapeer County home while the snowbirds are gone, those completing the form should include the snowbirds in the count.
- If no one is staying in the Lapeer County home, snowbirds should wait until they return to Michigan to complete the form sent to their residence there. If a form hasn't been received, a census taker is expected to contact residents between May and June.
- The Post Office does not forward census forms received in Michigan to the snowbirds' second residence.

— Jeff Hogan

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