

## **WHY THE CENSUS MATTERS**

By Elsbeth Mehrer, Manager, Workforce Development

On the eve of Canada Day, the government disclosed sweeping changes to the way data about Canadians – which languages we speak, how we live, our origins and our education levels – will be collected in the future.

With the federal government decision to eliminate the mandatory long form of the census, we'll lose critical details about the make-up of our nation.

This long questionnaire, which had been sent to one in five Canadian households at census time, asked 53 questions about migration, work, childcare, family life and income. Individual data collected through the forms was kept confidential but the cumulative data painted an in-depth picture of the nation, much beyond population counts. Because the questionnaire had been mandatory, the data was valid at the neighbourhood level while also letting us know how Calgary stacked up against the nation.

A spokesman for Industry Minister Tony Clement, the minister responsible for Statistics Canada, indicated the change was made in response to privacy concerns while, at the same time, refusing to disclose how frequently these concerns arose.

In advance of the 2011 census, as for past surveys, Statistics Canada staff thoroughly consulted on what information mattered most. More than 1,200 comments from users of the census data were gathered, presumably to shape future questionnaires.

Respondents rightly asked for more information about how Canadians commute to work, how long that travel takes, ethnic origin, activity limitations and language preferences.

This data would, as past information has, inform the development of programs and services by governments, service organizations and educators, to name a few. Investments in infrastructure such as hospitals, new schools and communities is influenced, in no small part, by the census.

This data is critical to understanding the needs of our nation which wants so desperately to be a global competitor. If we cannot understand, through the collection and analysis of solid information, how best to serve our own citizens how can we expect to attract the world and its investment?

As we focus in the future on labour market conditions and the shifting demographics of our workforce, it's critical we understand how all Canadians are making their way.

The census data shows us which occupations Calgarians are working in, pointing to sectors on the rise and those pulling back. The data also illustrates how those with a high school diploma stack up against people with a university education or how youth compare with recent immigrants or Aboriginals in terms of employment.

Understanding such differences enables policy-makers to plan interventions and offer supports to level the playing field and make opportunities evident and accessible to all.

This decision will weaken the quality of the census data that illustrates both our disparity and our commonalities as Canadians. Such information is vital for ensuring public policy decisions can be undertaken in a responsible manner.

It's clear this decision is ungrounded in statistical validity and short-sighted. It must be reversed or risk leaving us blind.