

Census 2020: The Power of Funders Working Together

By Andy Davey



Neighborhood community centers in Madison do amazing work every day. But when they turn a few dozen sandwiches, a stack of flyers, and some quick keystrokes on a laptop into more than \$1 million dollars of investment back into our community, it feels downright magical.

This fall, Madison Community Foundation, UW Health, National Guardian Life, Alliant Energy, and CUNA Mutual Group pooled together a modest \$29,000 to fund outreach by local community centers to help their residents, especially those who are typically undercounted, complete the census.

Estimates show that for each person not counted by the census, \$20,000 of critical federal and state funding is lost. The community centers we funded were able to help more than 180 households complete the census. That translates into at least several million dollars over the next decade. By working with other funders, we were able to reach far more people than if Madison Community Foundation had been the sole funder.

The outreach the community centers conducted was, of course, not magic. It was an outgrowth of many years of careful relationship building and meaningful programming. While they were able to mobilize quickly and successfully in this final census push, they told us they could have done more if they had gotten funding earlier, so they could have engaged residents in richer conversations about the importance of the census. Moreover, these conversations could have dovetailed with efforts to mobilize their communities in broader civic engagement.

While this effort was successful, it highlights two important lessons. One: when funders work together around shared goals, we can have a bigger impact. Two: sustained and strategic collaboration to fund civic engagement work can do even more to make our democracy stronger, fairer, and more equitable.