In preparing for the 2020 U.S. Census, New York City has a comprehensive plan to engage with hard-to-count populations, and will direct the $26 million allocated in Mayor Bill de Blasio’s executive budget toward census outreach, education, and public awareness efforts, said the city’s director of the Census, Julie Menin. Among the innovations planned: pop-up centers at community centers and libraries, to explain the form and help people to fill it out online. And Menin promises that city dollars will go toward advertising in community and ethnic media to reach the many different communities in NYC through their trusted media outlets.

Menin and others spoke at a conference, “2020 Census: Making New York Count” held Wednesday afternoon at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY. The conference was organized by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and the Center for Community and Ethnic Media at the J-school, and was supported by the UJA-Federation of New York.

In her remarks, Menin pointed out that the city’s investment in ensuring an accurate and full count of New Yorkers outstrips New York State’s investment of $20 million for the entire state, and demonstrates a “deep commitment” on the part of the city. She noted that community-based contracting, details of which will be announced in coming weeks, will receive “at least $9 million in allocations.”
Rabbi Bob Kaplan of the JCRC-NY, in his opening remarks at the conference, emphasized the critical importance of the decennial census to the gathering of about 100 community leaders and community and ethnic media journalists in attendance. “If we get the wrong data, not only here in our city but nationwide,” he said, “we’re going to have a very skewed view of what we are all about for the next 10 years.” We can’t afford to have the wrong data, said Kaplan, “at this period in our history.”

Why self-response is important

Lisa Moore, assistant regional census manager at the NY regional census center of the U.S Census Bureau, repeatedly offered reassurance to those concerned about the privacy and sanctity of the data that the data would be “safe.”

Joseph J. Salvo, director of the population division at the NYC Department of City Planning, emphasized the importance of self-response in completing the census form. He showed through numerous examples that data collected during the 2010 Census by in-person enumerators, who follow up when people fail to file the form, was far less reliable than self-reported data, often because enumerators must rely on information from “proxies” such as neighbors. Steven Romalewski, director of the CUNY Mapping Service at the Center for Urban Research at the CUNY Graduate Center, discussed the mapping tool he developed which provides a detailed look at communities, down to the census tract level, which were especially hard-to-count in 2010, and which may prove similarly challenging in 2020.

During the 2010 Census, New York City had an average self-response rate of 61.9 percent, and some communities in Brooklyn had response levels far lower, close to 50 percent. These response rates, Menin stressed, are simply “unacceptable.” Future federal funding of roads, bridges, education and the like are affected by the census count, as is the allocation of Congressional seats. In a panel of community leaders, Pastor Gilford T. Monrose, director of faith-based and clergy initiatives for the Office of Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, led audience members, call-and-response style, in chanting “Brooklyn Counts – 100 percent.”
As Salvo noted, some parts of Upper Manhattan, including Washington Heights and Inwood, showed very high response rates of close to 80 percent in the last census, even though they might not have been expected to, given the immigrant share of the population. And in some parts of the country, response rates were at 100 percent. If somebody doesn’t think the Census matters to them, said Rabbi Kaplan in his concluding remarks, “just find out what’s important to them and just tell them ‘everything that’s important to you will be based upon those numbers.’”