

'LET YOUR VOICES BE HEARD'

It's vital for veterans to participate in the Census; their benefits and services depend on it

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI

The U.S. Census Bureau has something to say to the nation's veteran community: "Think of the 2020 Census as a mission-critical roll call to make your numbers known. Veterans benefit directly when their communities are counted correctly. Tell other veterans how the Census impacts services they rely on."

USAF senior master sergeant (retired) and veterans service officer Virginia A. Wimmer would like to emphasize that message. She's the deputy director of the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, which assists thousands of veterans and their family members each year.

"First and foremost, veterans should take part in the Census to be counted," Wimmer says. "It's important that our legislators know who we are, where we are and what we need, so they can appropriately allocate funding and resources to the communities where we live."

There are livelihoods at stake, Wimmer points out. Census data are used to guide the distribution of hundreds of billions of dollars in federal tax dollars, with veterans receiving a portion of that in a broad menu of earned benefits and quality-of-life dividends. In a real sense, the Cen-

sus ultimately funds veteran services, which include pension benefits and employment opportunities.

Pre-pandemic, Wimmer's office blanketed the county, spreading the word to veterans about the importance of Census participation.

It hosted benefits fairs and employment fairs, had a presence at veterans events at VFW and American Legion posts, and visited college and university campuses. Now, with such outreach prohibited, it has turned largely to video and audio conferencing as well as posters.

"Veterans love to tell war stories," Wimmer says, "but now they need to start telling Census stories. I think more veterans would participate if they heard from a prominent veteran at the front of this. Getting (retired four-star general) Colin Powell as a spokesman would be nice."

If Wimmer could speak directly to the millions of veterans in California, she would first assure them that the Census does not share personal information, a concern among many veterans, she says. Then she would urge, "Stand up, be counted and let your voices be heard." •



Virginia A. Wimmer, who served in the Air Force, now pilots veterans and their families to the services they need.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VIRGINIA A. WIMMER

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Virginia A. Wimmer
Deputy director, San Joaquin
County Veterans Service
Office



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REPRESENTATION MATTERS

For the first time, Census recognizes
LGBTQ community

BY ANNE STOKES



Katalina Zambrano first started identifying as transgender in the seventh grade. She was harassed and bullied. Back in the 1990s, there were no support programs in her community for her or her family. For all intents and purposes in that time and place, LGBTQ rights did not exist.

"I think if I didn't have the support from my family, I wouldn't have made it," she says. "But my family didn't know where to turn because there was no PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays], there was no trans support groups.

"It was stressful for me, it was stressful for my family ... there were no support groups at all for all my young adult life."

Despite the intense harassment from students, faculty and staff throughout high school, Zambrano graduated with her chosen name on her diploma. Unfortunately, the hostility and discrimination didn't end. She struggled to find employment, experienced harassment from law enforcement and faced discrimination from doctors and therapists.

Today, Zambrano has become the change she wished to see in her community. She serves as gender spectrum coordinator with Central Valley Pride Center. She's worked with several LGBTQ advocacy groups counseling youth going through the

same struggles she endured and has helped develop diversity training for local schools and businesses.

While things have gotten better for Zambrano, LGBTQ communities still lack support and services.

"The resources aren't given to Merced Health, the Office of Education, Merced County mental health ... because there is no one counting these people," she says. "On top of that, I feel like a lot of them stay in the closet because there are no resources for them and there's nobody advocating for this community."

This year, however, the Census is recognizing same-sex households for the first time in its 230-year history. Counting LGBTQ communities provides comprehensive documentation that enables schools, government agencies and more to provide resources community members need.

"We matter and we should be counted. If we don't show that we are here and there are many of us, how do we expect anything to change?" she says. "We have to stand up, we have to let people know that there are a lot of us and we need resources ... it's a scary time, but it'd be scarier for it to pass us by and continuing to be this way." ●

**"We matter
and we should be
counted."**

Katalina Zambrano
GENDER SPECTRUM COORDINATOR WITH
CENTRAL VALLEY PRIDE CENTER

Katalina Zambrano became the change she wished to see in her community, serving LGBTQ youth and families.
PHOTO COURTESY OF KATALINA ZAMBRANO



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