A LETTER FROM U.S. PHILANTHROPIC LEADERS

OVER 300 GRANTMAKING EXECUTIVES FROM ACROSS THE COUNTY – AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER – JOIN TOGETHER TO CALL FOR REMOVAL OF THE CITIZENSHIP QUESTION ON THE 2020 CENSUS SURVEY

August 2, 2018

Ms. Jennifer Jessup
Departmental Paperwork Clearance Officer
Department of Commerce
Room 6616
14th and Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Submitted via regulations.gov

RE: Comments on Proposed Information Collection on 2020 Census

Dear Ms. Jessup,

We write in response to the June 8 notice in the *Federal Register* requesting comments on the 2020 Census proposed information collection. We urge the Department of Commerce to withdraw the citizenship question from the 2020 Census questionnaire because we believe it will significantly undermine efforts to achieve a fair and accurate census in 2020.

We are leaders of nonpartisan philanthropic institutions from across the country, large and small, giving hundreds of millions of dollars each year to advance the common good and improve the quality of life in the United States. We have different funding priorities, are ideologically diverse, and do not always agree with each other. But we wholeheartedly agree that the citizenship question should not be part of the 2020 Census.

Across our varied institutions, we share a commitment to reliable and accurate data as a necessary foundation for a well-functioning government, robust civil society, and thriving business sector in the United States. We rely on accurate census data to help identify community needs and prioritize grantmaking, and our grantees rely on accurate census data to serve communities, especially those that are hard-to-count, through their work on various issues including poverty, health care, criminal justice reform, racial equity, education equity, and infrastructure improvement.

On January 19, 2018, the Census Bureau's Chief Scientist and Associate Director for Research and Methodology, John M. Abowd, warned Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross that adding a citizenship question "harms the quality of the census count." The January memo describes the impact: "reduced self-response," "increased item nonresponse," "erroneous enumerations increase," and "whole-person census imputations increase." The bureau emphasized the expected lower response rates and data quality problems "will be amplified during the 2020 Census compared to historical levels." Nonetheless, Secretary Ross instructed the Census Bureau on March 26 to add the citizenship question currently asked on the American Community Survey (ACS) to the 2020 Census.

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 2 of 18

The Census Bureau's own Scientific Advisory Committee (CSAC), a committee of appointed academics and other census experts, strongly disagreed with the decision to add the citizenship question. They noted that the bureau normally tests a question thoroughly for many years before adding it to a survey, but in this case added the citizenship question with no testing or research. "We think the rationale offered by Sec. Ross in favor of adding the question relied on flawed logic," said the CSAC, adding that the question raises concerns about the completeness and accuracy of the 2020 Census, as well as the future of public trust in the Census Bureau. Similarly, over the years, ten former Census Bureau directors from both Republican and Democratic administrations have repeatedly noted that adding a citizenship question without necessary testing endangers the quality of all census data because it could discourage census participation among the tens of millions of households with non-citizen members, have unknown adverse consequences for other populations' participation, and possibly influence the accuracy of responses to other census questions, such as those collecting data on race and ethnicity.

Although the citizenship question is asked on the ACS, which is sent only to a sample of households, experts agree that it needs to be tested for the 2020 Census because the decennial census is a different collection operation, which goes to every household, and is in a different political climate than when the question was tested for the ACS. The last, best chance to test the question in the context of the 2020 Census was the 2018 End-to-End Census Test. However, that test, well underway in Providence County, Rhode Island does not include the citizenship question.

If anything, a new analysis of ACS data corroborates a broader analysis that the Census Bureau shared with Secretary Ross demonstrating a "decline in self-response for noncitizen households" and higher rates of Hispanics breaking off completion of questions such that "survey response quality is differentially affected." The new analysis, which we are willing to share with the Census Bureau, shows that the citizenship question had the highest non-response rate of any 2016 ACS question that also will be on the 2020 Census questionnaire. Many of the hardest-to-count groups were the likeliest to leave that question unanswered.

The situation may have worsened since 2016. A September 20, 2017 Census Bureau memorandum noted that "fears, particularly among immigrant respondents, have increased markedly this year...These findings are particularly troubling given that they impact hard-to-count populations disproportionately, and have implications for data quality and nonresponse." This conclusion alone, reached prior to the decision to add the citizenship question, warrants removal of any inquiry into citizenship status on the decennial questionnaire.

Estimates from the Census Bureau and external researchers show recent decennial censuses have resulted in net undercounts in communities of color – Blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Middle Easterners and North Africans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Latinos – and among children under five years old. Many households in these communities do not trust government, and many may have family members who are fearful of responding to the 2020 Census. Adding the citizenship question in this climate of fear and distrust will have a disproportionate impact on hard-to-count communities. Being undercounted deprives children, families, and whole communities of critical resources ranging from health care to education to public infrastructure.

Many of our foundations have a strong working relationship with the Census Bureau, in some cases stretching back decades. Many are supporting research, education, outreach, and other

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 3 of 18

efforts to help the bureau fulfill our mutual goal of a fair and accurate count. Even before the citizenship question was added, there was concern about the difficulty of ensuring that the hardest to reach are counted in the 2020 Census. The question unnecessarily adds to the challenge by increasing the hesitancy of our grantees and trusted community leaders to encourage participation in the census.

For all the reasons stated above, we urge you to withdraw the citizenship question from the 2020 Census and instead focus on making sure everyone in the U.S. is counted once, only once, and in the right place.

Thank you for your attention to our comments. If you have any questions or need any further information, please contact Gary Bass at the Bauman Foundation (baumanfoundation@baumanfoundation.org).

Sincerely,

Joe Del Guercio President and CEO A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation Bethesda, MD

Cali Brooks
President and CEO
Adirondack Foundation
Lake Placid, NY

Ramon Gardenhire Vice President of Policy and Advocacy AIDS Foundation of Chicago Chicago, IL

Trevor Storrs
Executive Director
Alaska Children's Trust
Anchorage, AK

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President and CEO
Albuquerque Community Foundation
Albuquerque, NM

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William Wood CFO Applied Acoustics International Chicago Heights, IL

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Steven G. Seleznow President and CEO Arizona Community Foundation Phoenix, AZ

Audrey Yamamoto President and Executive Director Asian Pacific Fund San Francisco, CA

Shanaysha Sauls, Ph.D.
President and CEO
Baltimore Community Foundation
Baltimore, MD

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 4 of 18

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 5 of 18

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 6 of 18

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 7 of 18

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Poughkeepsie, NY Wilmington, DE

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Executive Director
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San Francisco, CA
Allison Cusick
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Con Alma Health Foundation Democracy Fund

Santa Fe, NM Washington, DC

Leslie Ramyk Christine Marquez-Hudson Executive Director President and CEO Conant Family Foundation Denver Foundation, The

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President and CEO Executive Director
Consumer Health Foundation Derby Community Foundation

William Political and the Community Foundation

Washington, DC Derby, KS

Felicia Goodman Mary Panesar
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Waco, TX Palm Desert, CA

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 8 of 18

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East Tennessee Foundation

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President

Endowment for Health

Concord, NH

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Philanthropic Advisor England Family Foundation

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President and CEO

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Norwalk, CT

Suzanne Hoban Executive Director

Family Health Partnership Clinic

Crystal Lake, IL

Christine Elbel
Executive Director
Fleishhacker Foundation
San Francisco, CA

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Executive Director

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Freeport, IL

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Fund for New Jersey, The

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018

Page 9 of 18

David J. Younggren President and CEO

Gary Community Investments

Denver, CO

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Cleveland, OH

Gregg Behr Executive Director Grable Foundation Pittsburgh, PA

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Executive Director

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Grand Rapids, MN

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Portland, OR

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Greater New Orleans Foundation

New Orleans, LA

Bruce McNamer

CEO

Greater Washington Community Foundation, The

Washington, DC

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Los Altos, CA

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Hagerman Foundation, The

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Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

Hartford, CT

Thomas Kelly

VP Knowledge, Evaluation and Learning

Hawaii Community Foundation

Honolulu, HI

Bridget McCandless President and CEO

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Kansas City, MO

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Health Foundation for Western and Central New York

Buffalo, NY

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Crystal Townsend

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Healthcare Initiative Foundation

Germantown, MD

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Healthy Communities Foundation

Riverside, IL

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Heart and Hand Fund Half Moon Bay, CA

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 10 of 18

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Founder

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Executive Director
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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 11 of 18

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Boston, MA

Lina Park
Executive Director

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Lancaster, PA

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CEC

Latino Community Foundation

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Latino Community Foundation of Colorado

Denver, CO

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Seattle, WA

Gilda Pedraza Executive Director

Latino Community Fund (LCF Georgia)

Atlanta, GA

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Lebowitz-Aberly Family Foundation

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Lederer Foundation, Inc.

Lakewood, CO

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Legal Foundation of Washington

Seattle, WA

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President

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 12 of 18

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McPherson, KS

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Patricia Blakely Executive Director Merchants Fund, The Philadelphia, PA

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Mertz Gilmore Foundation

New York, NY

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Minneapolis, MN

Sarah Herrick

Grant and Scholarship Manager Mount Dora Community Trust

Mount Dora, FL

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Napa Valley Community Foundation

Napa, CA

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Officer

Nell Newman Foundation

Santa Cruz, CA

Henry Der

Senior Program Officer NEO Philanthropy New York, NY

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Nevada Community Foundation

Las Vegas, NV

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 13 of 18

Richard Ober

President and CEO

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Lorie Slutsky President

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New York, NY

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Caitlin Davis
Executive Director

North Star Civic Foundation

Portland, OR

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Northwest Area Foundation

Saint Paul, MN

Guy Rovezzi President

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Torrington, CT

Jesse Beason

Vice President of Strategy and Public Affairs

Northwest Health Foundation

Portland, OR

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Ocean Reef Community Foundation

Key Largo, FL

Sara Boyd

President and CEO

Omaha Community Foundation, The

Omaha, NE

Patrick Gaspard

President

Open Society Foundations

New York, NY

Jake Goodman Executive Director Opportunity Fund Pittsburgh, PA

Julie Shaffer Executive Director Oreg Foundation Boulder, CO

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President and CEO

Oregon Community Foundation, The

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Marian Blankenship Executive Director

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Springfield, OR

Roberta Norman Interim Co-Director Park Foundation, Inc

Ithaca, NY

Jennifer Fleming DeVoll President and CEO

Pasadena Community Foundation

Pasadena, CA

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Patricia Kind Family Foundation, The

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 14 of 18

Michelle Greanias Executive Director PEAK Grantmaking Washington, DC

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Philadelphia, PA

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Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation

Buffalo, NY

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Executive Vice President

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Philadelphia Foundation, The

Philadelphia, PA

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Philadelphia Health Partnership

Philadelphia, PA

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Chicago, IL

Deborah James Program Director

Pincus Family Foundation Washington Township, NJ

Maxwell King
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Pittsburgh, PA

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CEO

Polk Bros. Foundation

Chicago, IL

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Washington, DC

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Executive Director
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Executive Director

Potomac Health Foundation

Woodbridge, VA

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Lucille E. Dabney Executive Director

Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise

Pittsburgh, PA

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Prosper Road Foundation

Chicago, IL

Liz Powell

Executive Director

Racine Community Foundation

Racine, WI

Erin Kahn

Executive Director Raikes Foundation

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Brenda Sharpe President and CEO

REACH Healthcare Foundation

Merriam, KS

Neil D. Steinberg
President and CEO
Rhode Island Foundation

Providence, RI

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 15 of 18

James Becker Eric J. Jolly

President and CEO

President and CEO

Scient Boul & Minnesota Country B

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Linda Beech Cutler
CEO
Ruth Schimel, Ph.D.
Co-Founder, Manager
Sacramento Regional Community Foundation
Schimel Lode, The

Sacramento, CA Washington, DC

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 16 of 18

Tony Mestres
President and CEO
Seattle Foundation
Seattle, WA

Brian F. Boyd Executive Director Sequoia Foundation Tacoma, WA

Diana Doherty
Manager
Southert Foundation

Seybert Foundation, The Doylestown, PA

•

Danielle Garbe CEO

Sherwood Trust Walla Walla, WA

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Sacramento, CA

Erica K. Wood
Chief Community Impact Officer
Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Mountain View, CA

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Orange, CA

Tonya Allen President and CEO Skillman Foundation, The

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President and CEO

Southwest Florida Community Foundation

Fort Myers, FL

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Grand Ronde, OR

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Square One Foundation

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Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 17 of 18

Lisa O'Brien
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Tags Community Founds

Taos Community Foundation

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Telluride, CO

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Allan Oliver Executive Director Thornburg Foundation

Santa Fe, NM

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Toledo, OH

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Executive Director
Unbound Philanthropy

New York, NY

Colleen Laing
Associate Director, Planning and Public Policy

United Way of King County

Seattle, WA

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United Way of the Columbia-Willamette

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Olympia, WA

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Stacie Ma'a President

Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation

Berkeley, CA

Ellen Dorsey
Executive Director
Wallace Global Fund
Washington, DC

Sue Van President

Wallace H. Coulter Foundation, The

Miami, FL

Jennifer Lockwood-Shabat

President and CEO

Washington Area Women's Foundation

Washington, DC

Letter from U.S. Philanthropy Leaders Calling for Removal of Citizenship Status Question August 2, 2018 Page 18 of 18

Jan DeBerg
Executive Director

Watertown Area Community Foundation

Watertown, SD

Angela Jones Hackley
Partner and Chief Program Officer
Wayfinder Foundation, The

Waite Park, MN

Fred Ali

President and CEO Weingart Foundation Los Angeles, CA

Edward Kissam

Trustee

Werner-Kohnstamm Family Giving Fund

Oakland, CA

Conny Bogaard Executive Director

Western Kansas Community Foundation

Garden City, KS

Catherine Crystal Foster Executive Director Westly Foundation Menlo Park, CA

Mauri Ingram
President and CEO

Whatcom Community Foundation

Bellingham, WA

Regina McGraw Executive Director Wieboldt Foundation

Chicago, IL

Larry Kramer President

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Menlo Park, CA

Sheri Scavone
Executive Director

WNY Women's Foundation

Buffalo, NY

Donna P. Hall President and CEO Women Donors Network San Francisco, CA

Lauren Y. Casteel President and CEO

Women's Foundation of Colorado

Denver, CO

Diane Cornman-Levy Executive Director WOMEN'S WAY Philadelphia, PA

Grace Hou President

Woods Fund Chicago

Chicago, IL

Craig Showalter President and CEO

Wyoming Community Foundation

Laramie, WY

Robert Uyeki

CEO

Y and H Soda Foundation

Moraga, CA

Linda G. Moore President and CEO

Yakima Valley Community Foundation

Yakima, WA

Merryl Snow Zegar

Trustee and Executive Director Zegar Family Foundation

New York, NY