

THE STORY GOES | CELINA PENA | 2020 CENSUS

MOLLY: Hey there! It's Molly Cox with SA2020, here along with Kiran Kaur Bains—

KIRAN: Hi friends.

MOLLY: Also, with SA2020, and this is The Story Goes, a collaborative podcast between SA2020 and KLRN, your (soft, quiet voice) local public television station. Every time I do it that way, and every time it makes me giggle. It's just silliness. We are coming to you live from our darkened closet. It's exciting.

KIRAN: We are here with Celina Pena.

MOLLY: Celina is officially, we'll say officially with LiftFund. You are here, however, in your capacity today as the co-chair of San Antonio's Census Count. I'm like, that's kind of a major deal to be a co-chair. We're going to talk a little bit more about the Census as well. The Story Goes is an opportunity to give you an overarching, better story, more filled out story of a topic, things that are going on in San Antonio. You may have heard a tiny bit, or you know a little bit, or a nugget, and we bring in the people who know more and can tell you all the things. And Celina is that person today. [\(1:06\)](#)

CELINA: Oh dear. Alright.

MOLLY: You are the person who knows more. (Laughs) Celina, tell me, first of all, 2020 is a big year. There's elections happening. We've been thinking about it for a hot minute over at SA2020.

KIRAN: Been trying to. Some ideas.

MOLLY: Right, maybe a couple. Yeah, you know it's the start of the new decade, and the Census happens, as it happens every single start of the decade. This year, particularly, the Census has been in the news, sort of like, we know that it exists. I keep saying I know I filled out the Census probably ten years ago, and I don't remember doing it. I don't know why. [\(1:48\)](#)

CELINA: Well, think about how old you were then. I mean, not to talk about age, however, it's not something we do daily.

MOLLY: Exactly. Let's start first with the idea that there's a Census Count Committee, that you're a co-chair of. You're volunteering your time. How did you even get involved in this? [\(2:08\)](#)



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CELINA: Right, well, in terms of the call to care and to action, were the Complete Count, which is the official name-- San Antonio and Bexar County Complete Count Census Committee. It really was a sense of this is going on, and we need some leadership as it relates to understanding the importance of the Census, and you know, I thought about it. "Wow, this is really geeky." More importantly, I use this every day in my work. There are so many people who use the Census to guide them on important policies and thoughts, anywhere from education to transportation to commerce, as it relates to what success looks like. So, when they said, "Hey, we have this group that's going to focus on closing the gap and making sure we are successful as a city and county." I said, count me in. [\(3:05\)](#)

MOLLY: I like that you used the Complete Count's tagline as well, "Count Me In," which is where we are at. So, let's talk very specifically about the Census then.

KIRAN: I also appreciate that you said, "call to care" and "call to action." So, exactly, speaking more about the Census, why should we all care about it? [\(3:28\)](#)

CELINA: Well—

MOLLY: Hold on, she's going to (inaudible).

CELINA: (overlapped with MOLLY) It starts, you know, I'm not going to overwhelm everyone, but when I start thinking about the Census, which is daily, I start hyperventilating the importance of it. It starts right when you walk outside your door, from the street and sidewalk that's there to the school that's right around the corner to the healthcare clinic to the highways we jump on. All of that plays a key role because federal dollars are attached to programming and the work that we do as a city to make sure we run successfully. So, when we think about why should someone care, it's the mother who is signing up for maybe early childhood care to the mother or father who is getting ready to sign someone up for community college. It also plays a key role in how HEB thinks they are going to land their next store from a commerce perspective, and what health clinics are going to be in certain places as well. From that one- one to that neighborhood- to- me to that city- to- me, it all plays a role. As I mentioned care, care is by helping, not only our next-door neighbors, but those all around us a community to be counted. [\(5:01\)](#)

MOLLY: The idea around counting right is sort of the Census has a long history of figuring out what our districts look like and our representation, and you just mentioned where HEB puts their stores. The SA2020 uses Census data to show us where we stand on our Community Vision. The Food Bank uses it in order to figure out where we maybe need to be putting programs and services. When we think about the Census, too, it's like "Hey, you need my information?" And there's also a sense of, I think, particularly over the last few years, the sense of tension between government transparency and trust, and I think, I'm interested then if we created this Complete Count Committee, as they called you to care and called you to act, was it



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also to get people to understand, not only the importance of the Census itself, but why someone should actually get counted and opt-in? [\(6:05\)](#)

CELINA: Yeah, I mean, I think in terms of that tension, when we think about successful campaigns, whether that be recruitment for the local school, it usually starts with people you know. It leads to you know that funnel of big. So, the government is big, and when we look at what our work is to do, it's really to ensure that we meet what we did in 2010 from a Census Count. So, as San Antonio and Bexar County, the goal is really that we have about 500,000 that are a population within the city and the county that are considered a hard to count. Now, no one likes to be called hard to count. However, this means additional resources need to get into the community to make sure we count the homeless population, the veteran population, so under 5 in households is also a huge importance as well for us. So, when we think about trust and really the potential of people not wanting to take action, wanting to be counted, we have 53 partners and organizations within the Complete Count that are helping us bridge and grow that trust, specifically for those populations. I'm not doing it alone. There's a whole army that cares to make sure we reach those populations as well. [\(7:44\)](#)

KIRAN: Yeah, to be sure right, we are talking about the tension very specifically is the fact that specific populations and large parts of our community, have historically *not* trusted government, and for good reason. Therefore, then the Census is the government asking for demographic information, or it's asking for things that we very well know will have an impact on our life and even the outcomes of our life, right. I'm also thinking then, because we know this starts at the beginning of every decade, now, it's ten years later, and it's happening again. What are the ways in which the strategies to reach folks who are, I know we are in the tiny dark room using hard to count—

MOLLY: In air quotes.

KIRAN: Air quotes, right! How have those strategies shifted when there has been hard to count populations since I would imagine, since the Census has existed? [\(8:39\)](#)

CELINA: Right, I mean, in terms of the first thing you would take, is what was done prior. We never start from scratch because then we'd all have insanity upon us, so that's important to recognize. The 2010 Complete Count actually did some great work as it relates to connecting CPS and VIA and SAWS, into creating campaigns, like "Hey customer's trust, we need to be counted, so we make sure that all our pipelines are working, that all of our buses are working..." So, messages like that are important. This special committee, as it relates to the work that they've done, we have a strong ISD structure that has been led by several folks that you may know, Coda Garza is one of our co-chairs, Juany Torres is also a co-chair. Really looking at how we create toolkits and how we replicate ISD's, Independent School Districts, to make sure there's something uniform to reach families. So, as partners, we can't help you check off boxes, but we can provide you as you may have heard, this is going to be an online count for the first



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time. So, those are tablets. Those are access to WiFi. You saw NEISD actually giving students hotspot cards, so how do we bridge really, the digital divide potentially that we are going to see as it relates to the Census as well. So, again, evolution of, means that there are new strategies that the Census is using, that we are concerned about as it relates to connectivity. [\(10:32\)](#)

KIRAN: Oh okay, which is so important. Often times in this podcast are referring to policies and programs that are led by institutions, in this case government, are partnering with other nonprofits or the corporate sector to figure out how to remove those barriers to participation to increase, reach folks and are able to fulfill that call to caring and call to action if they want to, if they choose to.

MOLLY: I'm curious then, as we are moving into the Census space, can you give us, what does the timeline look like?

CELINA: That's a great question.

MOLLY: Does it kick in right now? When do we do it? [\(11:14\)](#)

CELINA: Yeah, so...

MOLLY: Is somebody going to come to my house? How does it work?

CELINA: Yeah, so, there are a lot of folks who have raised red flags as it relates to the trust issue, but it's also because we live in such a hyper digital and I hate to scare folks listening to this, but scam activity. Folks need to be vigilant as folks in December, we actually had folks, meaning the Census had counters of you know houses and offices just to make sure they have to touch it. Everything's digital, but I mean you got to have some field work. Basically, that's what the Census has been doing. They will always be willing to share their badge. They will always be willing to give you a card that you could follow up with if you still doubt. So, for those who are either organizations or leaders letting folks know, you can ask. But Census workers will never ask you for your social security, your income, things like that, like why would you want to know? So, that's important from just a trust perspective. As it relates to timing, what will start happening is there will be mail drops in the middle of March, so that's really when people start getting noticed. The official day is not an April Fool's Joke, it is April 1st, 2020. But again, more work is being done prior to that, and you have the opportunity, the Census will be asking you to go online, and complete an actual questionnaire. That questionnaire is two pages for that first person, but that first question that person gets is how many people are in your household, and you would wonder that is an easy question, but they are very specific. You are then going to fill out your question about demographic information, as it relates to being counted, and then there's an attachment to each person that you've claimed in that household. It could take anywhere from a single moving really quickly to being a family of four that could take a couple of minutes as well. Then, after that April, another drop, so we are going to keep reminding you,



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the Census, the official Census Bureau, is going to keep reminding you, and if not, then the Census, not us, will have block walkers and will take it personal, face-to-face in the summer. [\(13:50\)](#)

MOLLY: Is the intention then that every person in San Antonio and Bexar County ultimately fills this out? Is that what we are hoping for? [\(13:56\)](#)

CELINA: So, it's not everyone. Ideally, we get a good number. In terms of realistic approaches, and the Census has some really great information as it relates to, you know, the notices and the information being shared. So, as I mentioned when we think about the populations that are being left out, it's super important for us to understand it's a percentage of a population that then helps us. As you all know, there is more work that the Census does post-20, every ten years, as it relates to ACS, American Community Survey, and also the Business Survey.

KIRAN: From what we understand, right Celina, I'm hearing you speak the stakes are really high for this. Something I'm seeing in all communication from the Complete Count Committee is just a 1% reduction in the count from our State could lead to a loss of \$300 million of federal funding—

CELINA: A year. [\(14:56\)](#)

KIRAN: A year.

CELINA: For ten years. Yeah.

KIRAN: Okay, my question then to you—

MOLLY: That math is real bad.

CELINA: It is. (laughs)

KIRAN: Yeah, we often times in this space are curious about leadership, and leadership progress and development. So, my question then to you is, as the co-chair of this work that the stakes are so high for it, what has prepared you in your own leadership career to take this on?

MOLLY: Kiran's like, "Hey, how are you going to make this so we don't lose \$300 million dollars a year?" (KIRAN laughs)

KIRAN: (laughing) You're solely responsible for this, right? [\(15:31\)](#)

CELINA: This is when Baby Yoda starts kind of flying around (MOLLY and KIRAN laugh) in terms of I need the Mandalorian to close the deal.



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KIRAN: I mean it's really like you said yes to this. It's clear you have such conviction for it.

CELINA: It's um, the other day we were presenting to Council, and it was very serious. I hyperventilated this because it was so important. That's okay because it means stakes are high.

KIRAN: You feel responsibility.

CELINA: I'm not alone. I think really in terms of just the pathway of service has always started from the home with me, and just being able to say how and where can we leverage the skill set that I've committed to making sure it helps our people. At the end of the day, through the pathway of the City of San Antonio, Methodist Healthcare Ministries, and LiftFund, I have really been able to hone in on my commitment, right, not only to San Antonio, but to other cities in saying, how can we make sure we are getting a leveling field, where everyone can be counted. This is part of it at the end of the day. Seriously, the federal dollars we draw down whether we are a city, a county, a region, or a state is so important on so many levels. Not only for those are marginalized, but also for those of us who thrive. That's really when we think about "the boat that floats," hopefully we all rise together. So, in terms of just, I am a project manager when I sleep, when I eat, so the poor team has had to deal with me like, "Okay, let's GANTT chart this out." They're like, "Whaaattt? You're a nonprofit. You're not supposed to do that." I'm like, "Oh, yeahhhh!" So, that's helped to, just having that skill set. Really the passion is just be able to give people the tools to be leaders within all of the committee work that we do and test those. It's really not a test, it's go live. We are not, there's no UA testing here, but we've had so many people step up to the plate as it relates to just saying, "I'm in. How do I help?" You have to be ready for that answer. [\(17:45\)](#)

MOLLY: Right, right. You have to actually have to say here's how you can.

KIRAN: You are absolutely not alone even in this room with us in this room and even our listeners, which brings us to what is your call to care and action to folks that are listening today? What do you want them to know about the Census? [\(18:02\)](#)

CELINA: Yeah. I think that if you are a provider, and you are thinking how, whether you are a provider of food, of professional services, of nonprofit services, if everyone can play a role in just sharing "Be counted. Count us in. Count me in." Whether you're an employer, you're self-employed, you can actually visit the Census webpage, they have partner information, such as a one-pager you can put in your MS Hall, or in your e-blast that you're sending to your donors or your clients, right, as it relates to outreach. Outreach, outreach, outreach from trusted people and organizations is super critical because if people have questions who are they going to go to? They either don't ask which is typically what happens, and we don't want that to happen, or they connect to an organization that's helping them. Centro Med has played a key role as it relates to the marginalized population from an elder perspective, but also from a youth



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perspective. You can go to sabexarcounmein.org for local information that the team, Dwayne Robinson from the County and Roberto Rodriguez from the City, have really been honing in on getting everyone cued in to. [\(19:18\)](#)

MOLLY: Perfect. I appreciate that you sort of stepped up for this. There's a space around our community all the time where we ask people to jump in and see if you can do it, whether it's Board service or on a commission or whatever. I think on this particular one since it's such a major year, and such a big challenge, it's cool that you did it. Particularly, you have other stuff you could be doing. Yeah, whatever, life, generally. (CELINA laughs) So, I'm appreciate that, too. So, somebody listening to this particular podcast is going to be like, "yeah, of course I'm going to fill this out when it comes to my house." "I'm an individual. I don't work at an organization. I want to talk to my neighbors." Should I go knock on their door's and say did you get that Census thing and fill it out? [\(20:03\)](#)

CELINA: I mean, any kind of advocacy, we don't want to be invasive, but we want to be like this matters to us. It not only matters to us today, but it matters for us tomorrow. So, once we're gone, it's really about building, as I mentioned earlier, we are not starting from scratch. Everything starts with a foundation, so 2020 will serve as a 2030 foundation, and we've already got to be thinking that way, too.

MOLLY: I love that so much. Thank you so much for doing this.

CELINA: Yeah, thanks for having us.

MOLLY: Of course, we will have everything you need to know about the Census linked on klrn.org/thestorygoes. When it drops in the mail in March, get ready to fill it out on April Fool's Day. Best way to do it.

KIRAN: It's not a joke!

MOLLY: It's not a joke, do it! (CELINA laughs) No jokes. Just Census.

CELINA: Thank you ladies, I appreciate it.

KIRAN: We appreciate you. [\(21:01\)](#)



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