

News & Updates

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How Changes to Census Privacy Protection Rules Affect Local Data, Planning, and Decision-Making



In June 2026, the US Department of Commerce issued Department Administrative Order (DAO) 216-26, which limits the privacy protections that the US Census Bureau may use in the decennial census and programs like the American Community Survey (ACS). This change has disrupted Census 2030 planning and data release schedules; for instance,

the Census Bureau recently announced an indefinite delay in releasing ACS one-year data for 2025. Once implemented, the new policy may reduce the timeliness, usefulness, and granularity of community-level data. The following guide, provided by John Quintero, State Data Center Coordinator and Census Liaison with the NC Office of State Budget and Management, explains what is known about the new policy and its effects.

What Is Changing under the New Policy?

The two agencies affected by this directive—the Census Bureau and US Bureau of Economic Analysis—must publish useful data while protecting the personal information shared by respondents. Since the 1970s, the Census Bureau has developed sophisticated methods of disclosure avoidance—called “noise infusion”—to enable the publication of more data for smaller places and populations. DAO 216-26, however, states that “any use of noise infusion is inconsistent with the Department’s policies.” Instead, the Census Bureau must “coarsen” data before publication or “suppress” data if that is the only way to maintain privacy.

DAO 216-26 offered no details on implementation, with most decisions—such as identifying which statistical products are covered—left to be determined. The order bans noise infusion in any covered statistical product (i.e., official Census Bureau releases that use data subject to Title 13 confidentiality restrictions). The order states that “coarsening shall be the preferred category of Disclosure Avoidance methods for all statistical products” and that “suppression shall be permitted as a last resort, only to be used when coarsening is prohibited by law or would substantially defeat the accuracy or usability of a statistical product.”

Why Was the New Policy Adopted?

Census Bureau officials have stated that noise infusion erodes trust in published statistics because advanced techniques are difficult to explain. Officials say there is a trade-off between the goals of statistical accuracy, respondent confidentiality, and data granularity. The decision of how to balance is a policy choice. The Department of Commerce determined

accuracy is the most important of the goals, even if it limits the data published for smaller places and populations.

What Does “Noise Infusion” Have to Do with My Community’s Data?

Consider a town with a census block that has one Asian American household. Releasing unedited results would provide granular data at the cost of the household’s privacy. In contrast, withholding the results would protect the household’s privacy but deprive the town of data.

Noise infusion resolves this trade-off by, as a former Census Bureau official explained, “Slightly altering granular data in such a way that the privacy and identity of individual people and businesses are protected in the statistics derived from them.” For instance, the Asian American household in the census block could be swapped with a household in an adjoining block that is identical in every way except race. This swapping would protect personal data and permit the release of data for more census blocks without altering the town’s overall results.

Is “Noise Infusion” the Same Thing as “Differential Privacy”?

Differential privacy is a form of noise infusion used in Census 2020. Differential privacy, the Census Bureau explains, adds “statistical noise—small, random additions or subtractions—to every published statistic so no one can re-identify a specific person or household with any certainty using any combination of the published data.” The systematic injection of randomness into a dataset allows statisticians to better assess trade-offs between data accuracy and privacy.

The adoption of differential privacy raised concerns, especially from technical experts and data users focused on small places and populations. Methodological debates aside, neither differential privacy nor noise infusion generally are forms of “error” or data fabrication. They are tools for balancing the competing goals of data accuracy, privacy, and granularity.

What Are Data “Coarsening” and “Suppression”?

Now the preferred disclosure avoidance method, data coarsening refers to “techniques that reduce precision,” such as rounding values, aggregating data, and reporting ranges. Each technique has trade-offs. Rounding is simple, yet it offers little protection for small counts and prevents totals from summing. Geographic aggregation is also straightforward, but it sacrifices granularity and disproportionately affects rural and tribal communities.

Data suppression, which is now the disclosure method of last resort, redacts individual values or whole categories of data by, for example, blanking out a cell in a table and noting the omission. To prevent a user from recalculating the suppressed value, multiple values in other tables must often be suppressed as well, which can create cascading data gaps.

How Will the Census Bureau Implement the New Policy?

In July, the Census Bureau’s Disclosure Review Board (DRB) released the policy’s initial parameters. For instance, the DRB defined “data swapping” as an impermissible form of noise infusion while also clarifying where the ban on noise infusion would not apply (e.g., products produced under contract for other agencies). The board also identified when certain types of synthetic data (e.g., imputation) could be used and the dates before and after which DAO 216-26 applies to data releases.

Which Census Products Will Be Affected by the New Policy?

The Census Bureau’s acting director wrote that DAO 216-26 applies to “all statistical products disseminated by the Census Bureau” and “covers any information produced by our staff or contractors using data protected under the confidentiality provisions of Title 13.” There currently is no comprehensive list of all affected Census Bureau products, but those **likely to be affected** include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Decennial Census, including the P.L. 94-171 Redistricting Data Program
- American Community Survey, both one-year and five-year estimates

- Population Estimates Program and similar demographic surveys
- County Business Patterns and other economic data for small areas
- Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics, including associated products like Quarterly Workforce Indicators and Job-to-Job Flows.

What Are the Immediate Impacts for North Carolina Communities?

The most immediate impact on North Carolina communities will come in September, which is when the Census Bureau typically releases the one-year American Community Survey (ACS) estimates for places with more than 65,000 residents. In August, the Census Bureau announced an indefinite delay in the release of the 2025 data to determine DAO 216-26 compliance.

The Census Bureau will likely also delay the release of the five-year ACS estimates, which normally happen in December. The five-year estimates provide detailed social, economic, housing, and demographic data for all places, regardless of population size. Even if the estimates are released on time, they will likely mix data subject to both the new and old privacy standards, which may compromise the information's accuracy and usability.

What Are the Long-Term Impacts for North Carolina Communities?

Using coarsening and suppression as the primary forms of privacy protection likely will result in the publication of much less social, economic, housing, and demographic data for North Carolina communities, with smaller places and populations affected disproportionately. As the State Demographer has noted, 21% of the state's counties have fewer than 20,000 residents, while 59% of all incorporated municipalities have no more than 2,500 residents.

In the absence of detailed ACS data, less populous communities will have limited insight into their economic and social dynamics, as well as into the needs of relatively small population groups (e.g., tribal communities) and sub-geographies (e.g., rural fire districts). A lack of detailed data will also limit the accuracy of demographic forecasts and prevent officials from calculating statistical rates such as community cancer rates or vacant housing patterns.

Lastly, DAO 216-26 has upended planning for Census 2030, which had assumed the use of noise infusion for products like the redistricting files. The Census Bureau has announced plans to release a demonstration data product in 2027, but compliance will require a significant redesign on a compressed timeline.

Article by Taylor Dellinger, Senior Data Analyst

Housing Authority Staff Perform Updates to Waiting Lists

Western Piedmont Council of Government's Regional Housing Authority (RHA) and Valdese Public Housing (VPH), like all public housing authorities, must establish a waiting list maintenance policy under HUD requirements. This policy keeps the waiting lists manageable by removing those who are no longer interested in receiving housing assistance. WPCOG's policy allows staff to perform waiting list maintenance as needed, which typically is once a year.

On July 1, 2024, the RHA opened the Housing Choice Voucher waiting list for applications. The RHA closed this waiting list after three weeks because it received a large number of applications. The RHA received approximately 3,000 applications within those three weeks.

On July 22, 2026, the RHA's waiting list consisted of 723 applicants. Starting on July 23, 2026, staff emailed all applicants with email addresses on their applications. The email asked whether the family was still interested in remaining on RHA's waiting list and required a response by August 13, 2026. Of the emails sent, approximately 70 percent of the applicants responded.

For those who did not respond to the first RHA update request, staff sent a follow-up email on August 12 as a second attempt to reach them. The final deadline to contact the RHA was midnight on September 3, 2026. Failure to respond resulted in the applicant's name being removed from the waiting list. As of September 2, 2026, 517 eligible applicants remain on the waiting list.

Article by Viveca Huffman, Housing Specialist & Chasity Houck, Housing Program Manager

Recognizing Grandparents and Kinship Caregivers on Grandparents Day



September brings transitions, traditions, and new beginnings. As summer gives way to fall, children head back to school, football seasons kick off, and families settle into familiar routines. The changing season often brings excitement and anticipation, along with opportunities to reflect on the people who guide and support us through life's many seasons.

One special tradition is National Grandparents Day, celebrated each year on the first Sunday of September. It is a time to

recognize the love, wisdom, and enduring influence grandparents have in their families' lives. For many, grandparents are cherished mentors, storytellers, and sources of unconditional support. In our four-county region alone, nearly 5,900 grandparents are estimated to be raising grandchildren, highlighting the significant role kinship families play in strengthening our communities.

For a growing number of families across North Carolina and the nation, grandparents are much more than occasional caregivers or beloved relatives. They have stepped into the role of parent once again, opening their homes and hearts, often unexpectedly, to grandchildren who need stability, care, and guidance. Kinship caregivers take on the challenges of raising children while often navigating their own retirement years, health concerns, and financial responsibilities. Their dedication reflects a profound commitment to family and demonstrates the strength and resilience that kinship families bring to our communities.

A Growing Reality Across North Carolina and the Nation

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, more than 89,000 grandparents in North Carolina raise grandchildren under the age of 18. Nationally, more than 2.5 million grandparents have assumed primary caregiving responsibilities for their grandchildren.

These caregivers represent every background, culture, and socioeconomic level. Many step into parenting roles at a stage in life when they expect to retire, travel, pursue personal interests, or simply visit grandchildren. Instead, they find themselves attending parent-teacher conferences, coordinating healthcare appointments, helping with homework, and navigating the complexities of raising children in today's world.

The circumstances leading to kinship caregiving are often unexpected and difficult. Parental substance use disorders, incarceration, mental health challenges, military deployment, economic hardship, illness, or family crises can leave children in urgent need of a safe and

stable home. When these situations arise, grandparents and other relatives frequently answer the call.

As Patricia, a grandmother who recently adopted her two grandchildren, shared:
"I thought my days of packing lunches and helping with homework were behind me. Now my home is full of laughter, school projects, and busy schedules again. It's not always easy, but being able to keep my grandchildren with family means everything to me."

While kinship caregiving can be deeply rewarding, it also presents unique challenges. Many caregivers face increased financial responsibilities, legal concerns, housing needs, health issues, and the emotional complexities of helping children heal from trauma or family disruption. In addition, caregivers often navigate technology, social media, and educational systems that look very different from what they experienced when they raised their own children.

"There are days when I feel like I'm learning right alongside my grandchildren," shares *Robert*, who is raising his three grandchildren. "From online school portals to social media, the world has changed a lot. But love, patience, and showing up every day still matter just as much as ever.

The Rewards and Realities of Raising Grandchildren

Although the challenges can be significant, many grandparents and relative caregivers describe their experience as one of profound purpose and fulfillment. They witness milestones, celebrate achievements, and create opportunities for children to heal, grow, and succeed.

These caregivers often become the foundation upon which children rebuild confidence, security, and hope for the future. Their commitment provides continuity during uncertain times and helps preserve important family connections.

As one North Carolina grandmother shared, "Life took an unexpected turn, but we've learned to grow together. Watching my granddaughter gain confidence, make friends, and feel safe again reminds me why every challenge is worth it."

"Children need consistency, encouragement, and someone who believes in them," says *Angela*, a kinship caregiver and advocate. "When relatives step in, we're not just providing a home. We're preserving family bonds, traditions, and a sense of belonging that can last a lifetime.

This Grandparents Day, let us celebrate not only the joy of grandparenting but also the courage, sacrifice, and resilience of grandparents and relatives who have stepped into parenting roles once again. Their dedication often goes unnoticed, yet their impact is immeasurable.

Whether it is offering practical assistance, helping with a meal, connecting families to resources, volunteering in the community, or simply providing a listening ear, each of us has an opportunity to support kinship families.

Their commitment changes lives, strengthens communities, and offers children what they need most: a loving family and a place to call home.

As we celebrate National Grandparents Day this September, we should honor all our grandparents who enrich our lives with their love and wisdom, and those who have answered the call to become parents again. Their willingness to provide safe, nurturing homes for their grandchildren creates opportunities for children to thrive while preserving family connections, traditions, and a sense of belonging that can last a lifetime.

Article by Mary Mitchell, Family Caregiver Support Administrator



The Western Piedmont Council of Governments has seen the Western NC Home Repair Readiness Program make considerable progress since March 2026. The program, established to help residents in the 17 most impacted and distressed counties affected by Hurricane Helene, is backed by a \$6 million grant from NCDEQ and administered through five regional councils of government.

Progress highlights to date:

- There are 494 applications in total. Of those applications: 261 are currently in the pipeline, 113 are completed, and 120 were closed or denied.
- Completed Repairs: 113 jobs have been successfully finished and paid, totaling \$1,788,684 in essential home investments.
- Key Upgrades: Ongoing rehabilitation efforts focus heavily on structural health, including 47 roof repairs/replacements, 42 HVAC updates, 22 water sealing projects, and 18 electrical improvements.

Visit wncready.org for more information, join the waitlist for home repairs, or check your eligibility.

Article by Ben Willis, Community & Economic Development Director

**Day 1 Families Fund Making an
Impact Across Our Region**



Year to date, the Day 1 Families Fund has provided critical support to **67 households across Region 3**, directly impacting **130 children**, with an additional three children expected in participating households.

Serving **Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, and McDowell Counties**, the fund has allowed the Homeless Response Team to respond quickly when families experience housing instability. By providing timely financial assistance and addressing immediate barriers, the program helps families remain housed and prevents temporary hardships from becoming homelessness.

The Day 1 Families Fund's flexibility has also helped families connect with longer-term stabilization resources, strengthening our region's ability to support households before they reach a housing crisis. These year-to-date results demonstrate the meaningful impact that timely assistance can have on family stability and housing security.

Need Assistance?

If you or your family are experiencing homelessness or housing instability and would like more information about available resources, please reach out to:

Amber Brafford
Homelessness Response Manager
(828) 485-4201
homelessresponse@wpcog.org

Article by Amber Brafford, Homelessness Response Manager

WPCOG Hosts NCAMPO Quarterly Meeting

For the first time, the Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization (GHMPO), housed within the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG), hosted a quarterly meeting of the North Carolina Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (NCAMPO).

NCAMPO brings together MPOs from across North Carolina to share information, discuss transportation planning and policy issues, and collaborate on challenges and opportunities affecting metropolitan areas statewide. The two-day gathering began with a mobile tour highlighting regional transportation and community investments, including a tour of the Hickory Trail Network and a visit to the Hickory Aviation Museum. The tours gave MPO partners from across the state a chance to experience projects and assets in the Greater Hickory region firsthand.

On the second day, WPCOG hosted the NCAMPO quarterly business meeting at its offices, where MPO representatives discussed statewide transportation planning topics, shared updates and best practices, and continued coordination on issues affecting MPOs and their local government partners. WPCOG and GHMPO were excited to welcome colleagues from across North Carolina for their first opportunity to host an NCAMPO meeting and to showcase the transportation investments, partnerships, and community assets found throughout the Western Piedmont region.

Article by Averil Ritchie, Transportation Planning Director

Western Piedmont Council of Governments
www.wpcog.org



Western Piedmont Council of Governments | PO Box 9026 | Hickory, NC 28603 US

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