NINA MOINI: This is *Minnesota Now.* I'm Nina Moini. The US Census Bureau won't count the nation's population again until 2030. But the federal agency is making plans for the survey now. And the Trump administration wants to change who gets counted, as well as the questions they're asked.

Under a proposed rule announced last month, the census would no longer include immigrants who are not US citizens or permanent residents. And it would stop collecting data on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In Minnesota, the nonprofit Hmong American Partnership is urging people to submit public comment. Joining me to talk about why is the group's president and CEO, May yer Thao. Thank you for joining me, May yer.

MAY YER THAO: Thank you so much for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: For many years, the trend was folks like yourself trying to get more detail into the census and more of an individualization or a breakdown to have more of that data to understand what is going on within the country. So this proposal would reverse that trend that's been going for decades, expanding the list of these racial and ethnic identities. So can you tell me about the work that was done to change the census as it relates to Hmong people?

MAY YER THAO: Thank you so much, Nina. It has been decades in the making for communities, such as the Hmong and other Southeast Asian immigrant refugee communities, to make sure that we were included specifically, because otherwise, we are grouped under the larger Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander category. And that becomes very misleading because our Southeast Asian immigrant refugee communities, we came to the US as refugees from war-torn countries and genocide.

And there are so many more socioeconomic disparities within the Southeast Asian communities. And that is why it is so significant to make sure that our communities are counted specifically so that our elected officials, government entities, all of us, can understand where are those disparities, and what is needed to make sure that these communities continue to be invested in so that they can become thriving communities.

NINA MOINI: So you're talking about the tangible results that come when you have more details available and you're able to examine things on a closer level. But is there a cultural significance as well or a feeling around it?

MAY YER THAO: It is truly around the day-to-day needs. How do we address the day-to-day needs of these communities to, again, move them out of poverty, low income, to higher educational attainment? It is for the good of all of us, in any given state and for the nation. Around the cultural question, it is also around the history of how some of our ethnic communities ended up in this country. And as refugees who supported the US during the Vietnam War, that is a political and cultural identity that is significant to preserve and for the rest of our fellow Americans to know our history here as well.

NINA MOINI: How do you use the data from the census? Perhaps in the work that you're doing.

MAY YER THAO: Correct. So at organizations, such as the Hmong American Partnership, we use it every day, Nina. We use it to help inform our elected officials about the communities that we serve, who are also our elected officials' constituents. We use it to explain to funders where the need is to ensure that these most vulnerable communities have resources and programs that will support them and lead them to economic mobility, economic stability.

So it is used at all levels, from the day to day, even understanding what are the trends in our community, how is the educational attainment improving or not, so that we know how to design programs, and again, to provide resources that will move these communities forward.

NINA MOINI: The Trump administration says it's making the changes because of, quote, "sensitive nature" of questions about race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and then, quote, "reduced need or usefulness of this information." What do you make of that? Or what's your response to that?

MAY YER THAO: The only response I have to that is that this is data that has always been needed and has always been useful for all levels of government and at the community level as well. I will not speculate as to the interpretation of those sorts of commentary. But this is the only data, this is the only robust source of data, that can share out to the rest of the nation around our Southeast Asian ethnic communities, and again, where they are at socioeconomically and demographically.

NINA MOINI: And the proposal goes further as well, to not counting, to stop counting people who are not citizens or permanent residents.

MAY YER THAO: Correct.

NINA MOINI: What's your reaction to that?

MAY YER THAO: I believe that we have to hold the Census Bureau to their promise of counting everyone. And everyone needs to be included and counted once, just once, in the right place.

NINA MOINI: There are a few steps before these changes would become reality. The public comment period we were wanting to talk about is open through next Monday, November 2. The proposal could see also challenges in court. Congress does have authority over the census. So does proposing these changes have an impact, even if they don't end up in the 2030 census to you?

MAY YER THAO: There is an impact. In 2023, for example, we had to work with the US Census Bureau because they acknowledged that ethnic communities, like the Hmong community, that we are Southeast Asian. And yet in 2023, they miscategorized our Hmong Americans under East Asians.

And so it is the constant advocacy work of ethnic communities, such as ours, to correct and continue to uphold the commitments that have been made so that they are not dismantled because these have been decades in the making of getting our communities included. That is the impact of this sort of narrative and these sorts of proposed rules.

NINA MOINI: May yer, what is your advocacy or work around this going to look like? You're asking people to be part of the public comments. What else? What other actions do you think you'll take?

MAY YER THAO: The biggest action and ask out of all of our neighbors and friends, not just here in Minnesota, but throughout the rest of the nation, is to please submit your own commentary against this ruling because that means communities, such as our Hmong communities here in Minnesota, and we are such a large community here. The ask is that everybody puts in a commentary and explain. You don't need to be an expert, but just share why it is so important to keep our race and ethnic data.

The other piece that we are working on with other national coalition partners is pushing the commentary deadline out to December 10. Currently, as you stated, the deadline to provide commentary, public commentary, is this next week, Monday. However, changes this big, this impactful to communities, need to have more time for thorough public review and public commentary.

NINA MOINI: May yer, have you thought about where else you would go or other organizations like yourself? This would only, obviously, relate to the census. There are other ways that people could get out and do this work. But the census is really what folks have relied upon for a long time. Have you thought about where else would you go to collect data to be able to understand what is going on, to then be able to impact things like policy?

MAY YER THAO: Sure. We do that work day in and day out, Nina, with local organizations, philanthropy, again, local government, state government. We talk a lot about the disaggregation of data. And there have been certain entities that have been able to move in that direction, which is wonderful and amazing.

However, when we think about on a national federal level, the Census Bureau is it. Even the American community surveys do not get to this level of detail. And without the Census Bureau counting our communities the way that they've been counting since 1990, a lot of the work that has made progress will again be disrupted, dismantled, and it will be very hard to move things on a more national level.

NINA MOINI: And it's every decade. It's not something that happens all the time. So it has significance for a while.

MAY YER THAO: Yes.

NINA MOINI: May yer, thanks for joining us and coming into the studio here and telling us about this. We appreciate your time.

MAY YER THAO: Thank you so much, Nina. And again, the ask is for all of you to also make sure that our communities are seen and counted. Thank you so much.

NINA MOINI: Thank you, May yer. May yer Thao is President and CEO of Hmong American Partnership in St. Paul.