February 3, 2017

Representative Robert “Bobby” Scott, Ranking Member
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Longworth House Office Building, 1201
Washington, DC 20515-4603

Dear Representative Scott and the Democratic Members of the Committee on Education and the Workforce,

On behalf of over 30,000 individuals, communities, and businesses that rely on the availability of accurate, objective, and reliable federal statistics, the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) thanks you for your letter supporting the independence of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating its economic and workforce statistics to inform public and private decision-making. The leadership and employees of the BLS are extraordinarily well trained and dedicated to producing a broad spectrum of statistically valid measurements. The agency’s data are used by everyone from school guidance counselors to mayors, from big businesses making wage, retail siting, and recruitment decisions, to the Federal Reserve Board in setting interest rates. You do great service in defending its history and importance.

We also thank you for recognizing that the public’s view of federal statistics as reliable is critical to democracy. Public disbelief in federal statistics can lead to the use of unsubstantiated data in decision-making, potentially skewing the outcome of the decisions such data badly inform. Unwarranted public skepticism is also likely to lower federal survey response rates, making it more expensive to generate solid measures. In addition, skepticism about BLS figures can seep into a misunderstanding of federal statistics on everything else, including the economic, health, education, housing, trade, agriculture and energy, and justice statistics that come from other principal statistical agencies of the United States.

If there is anything we can do with you or your staff in continuing to generate public respect for federal statistics, we are at your service.

Sincerely,

Kitty Smith Evans

Katherine Smith Evans
Executive Director
The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

For over 100 years, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has initiated “monthly studies on employment and payroll.” Its present iteration – popularly known as the monthly employment situation report – provides non-partisan data on the United States labor market and the nation’s unemployment rate. We write to inquire about whether your Administration will continue the longstanding and bipartisan tradition of standing behind the BLS’s monthly employment situation report. We also seek a commitment that you and your Administration will not undermine or interfere with BLS’s independent mission to “collect, analyze, and disseminate economic information to support public and private decision-making.”

We believe our inquiry is warranted because of the apparent skepticism and distrust of the nation’s unemployment rate expressed by you and your White House staff. In the first few days of your presidency, the White House press secretary reportedly refused to cite the official unemployment rate when directly asked to do so by a reporter. This comes after a presidential campaign where you falsely characterized the unemployment rate as “one of the biggest hoaxes in American modern politics.” Last February, you also incorrectly claimed the unemployment rate is “probably 28, 29, as high as 35. In fact, I even heard recently 42%.” This was just a few days after BLS reported the unemployment rate was 4.9 percent.

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While the BLS's monthly employment situation report is not a panacea, it provides critical, non-partisan employment data that has been utilized for decades by presidents of both political parties, businesses of all sizes, Members of Congress, economists, and, most importantly, the American people. For them, the BLS monthly employment situation report has been a barometer of the country's economic well-being—and we believe Americans are correct to interpret it that way.

Moreover, BLS publishes five additional measures of unemployment and underemployment each month, which include those working part time but wanting to work full time, and those who are too discouraged to look for work because they believe there are no jobs available for them and the job search effort would be futile. These measures, when viewed in conjunction with the unemployment rate, provide the public and policymakers a more fulsome depiction of the extent of unemployment.

So when the BLS's independent analysis of the nation's labor market is mocked, politicized, and baselessly attacked, it not only delegitimates the BLS's critically important work. It also erodes the public's trust. We respectfully recommend that you and your staff keep this in mind in the days ahead.

In the event that you and your Administration endorse alternative metrics to gauge the nation's unemployment rate, we trust you will communicate that decision to us and the American people forthwith, as well as your rationale for doing so.

As Members of the House Education and Workforce Committee, which has legislative and oversight jurisdiction over the BLS, we appreciate your attention to the issues we raised. We look forward to working with you to build on the significant job gains and economic progress that were achieved during the Obama presidency. We also stand ready to work with you to restore balance to the economy so that hardworking Americans can get ahead and provide a better future for their families.

Sincerely,

ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Ranking Member
House Committee on Education and the Workforce

SUSAN A. DAVIS
Member of Congress

RAUL M. GRIJALVA
Member of Congress

JOE COURTNEY
Member of Congress