

Census office ready for '90, opens doors

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Officially, the U.S. Census will be taken April 1 of 1990. In practice, the headcount of America's 50 states and territories takes 2 1/2 years of preparation and two more years of analysis. "Our undercount has been declining," said a pleased Ross Forbes, a 26-year veteran of the decennial count. He is assistant manager of a Regional Census Center in Southfield which will serve Michigan, Ohio and West Virginia.

THE PUBLIC can see a lot of that preparatory work 1-4 p.m. today in

the Census Bureau's 20,000 square feet of offices. Visit Suite 200 of 27300 Eleven Mile Road is just a hop east of Inkster Road. Regional director Dwight Dean, other federal officials and Southfield Mayor Don Prussall will cut a ribbon at 3 p.m. To marketers and scholars, the most important room is right near the entrance — a reading room with pamphlets and books that are available. The census office is hiring, too. "The bulk of our staffing starts a year to a 1 1/2 years in advance," said Forbes.

THE SOUTHFIELD office is a

satellite of the downtown Detroit headquarters, where a permanent staff conducts continuing surveys on health, income, jobs and crime. Ten years ago, the prep work done by Dean, Forbes and Robert Petersen, another assistant manager, also was done in Detroit. But the Eleven Mile site was picked because the map-making and address list jobs are bigger and less centralized. Forbes marvels at the computerized map-making. "THIS IS ONE of 13 census centers in the U.S.," Forbes said. "There are a total of 43 district offices in those three states."

"This is the management center. We do all of the map preparation. We train all the management level staff (7-10 per office), a total of about 300. "We find space for the district offices. All the payroll work comes from this office. We're the computer center for all." At the peak, 125 workers will staff the regional center. BECAUSE 95 percent of Americans will reply to the census by mail, the bureau must have absolutely accurate addresses and maps. Those facts are stored on computer tape and updated, updated, updated. Two or three shifts of geogra-

phers, computer specialists and clerical people will do this work. The census folks are conscious not only of public relations but local governmental relations. Population figures are translated into congressional and legislative representation — and into a horde of federal grant programs. There have been lawsuits over alleged undercounting in the past. "Local communities will have a

chance to do local reviews," Forbes said of the maps and lists. AS THE DISTRICT offices are added, the Census Bureau will hire 600 to 1,000 enumerators, mainly local housewives seeking part-time work. Each enumerator will be responsible for a mapped area with about 400 housing units in it.

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