

TESTIMONY OF SCOTT LEVINS

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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS  
AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Good afternoon Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume and Members of the Committee. My name is Scott Levins and I am the Director of the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) at St. Louis, Missouri, a component of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Thank you for inviting me to testify about our ongoing efforts to eliminate the backlog of unanswered requests from veterans and their families for copies of their military service records.

The NPRC stores and provides access to more than 2 million cubic feet of records documenting U.S. military service of veterans of all branches of service. It also stores and provides access to more than 2 million cubic feet of civilian personnel records. Our mission is to provide access to these important records to government agencies, military veterans and their family members, former civilian Federal employees, and the general public.

We are the physical custodians of over 4 million cubic feet of analog, or paper records, and the access point for a rapidly growing volume of electronic records. The NPRC employs 824 federal employees and contractors, many of whom are veterans themselves, and all of whom are dedicated to responding to requests for military and civilian service records.

During the first two years of the pandemic, NARA significantly curtailed on-site production due to quarantines and limitations on building occupancy that were imposed to protect staff from COVID-19. As a result, NARA accumulated a large backlog of unanswered requests for military service records. NPRC never closed during the pandemic. Initially, although little was known about the spread of COVID-19, NPRC still maintained limited on-site operations to ensure that we responded to the most urgent requests for records, such as those necessary to support funeral services, emergency health care, and homeless veterans seeking shelter. As the country gained a better understanding of COVID-19 protections, NPRC continuously implemented new workplace safety protocols and incrementally increased facility occupancy levels. The NPRC ended facility occupancy limits and returned employees to an in-person work environment in March 2022.

In March 2022, the total count of unanswered requests for military service records was 604,000. Since then, NPRC has added 73 new Federal employees and 60 additional contractors specifically to address the backlog of requests for military service records. NARA has used funds generously appropriated by Congress to add these new staff and contractors, deploy laptops to NPRC staff, modernize the NPRC call center, and improve our information systems for fulfilling military records requests. NARA is partnering with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to digitize military service records and we are using those digitized records to expedite our responses to records requests where possible.

As of June 12, 2023, the backlog of unanswered requests for military service records at the NPRC is 271,279. We define the “backlog” as the number of requests received that have not been fulfilled within the 20 workday deadline for response. Since April 1, 2022, the NPRC has responded to almost 1.8 million requests for military service records, including both new and backlogged records requests. The NPRC has continued to receive new requests for military service records throughout the entire period, and the weekly volume of new requests has increased. Prior to the pandemic, we received approximately 21,000 requests per week; today, we are receiving a weekly average of over 24,000 new requests.

The NPRC has already eliminated the backlog of requests for separation documents (DD Form 214 or equivalent) and returned to its pre-pandemic level of servicing 90% of these requests in 20 days or less. In fact, currently, more than 90% of these requests are being serviced in less than ten days and more than 95% in less than 20 days. DD 214 requests represent approximately 60% of all requests received. It is the record most often needed by veterans and their dependents to prove eligibility for veterans’ benefits. NPRC prioritizes these requests ahead of other requests for military service records.

The backlog of overdue, unanswered requests is made up of requests for records *other than DD 214s*. “Other” requests are more complex than DD 214 requests and often require extensive redaction of third-party personal data; analysis of documents and extraction and verification of information contained therein; or research of secondary sources in order to collect responsive information. This category also includes requests which require the reconstruction of records lost in the [1973 fire](#). Due to the complexity, these requests take longer to service than requests for a DD Form 214.

We have a plan in place to eliminate the entire backlog by December of this year.

### **Pandemic Impact**

Prior to the pandemic, staff responded to requests for military records almost exclusively by retrieving paper records which were stored on-site and could not be accessed remotely. Responsive records were reproduced using photocopiers and dispatched in paper form primarily through the United States Postal Service. Records were not digitized during the order fulfillment

process, the NPRC did not have an electronic records repository, and did not have a secure way to transmit electronic records. NPRC staff did not have laptop computers, its production system was not accessible remotely, and with few exceptions, none of the work of the NPRC could be performed by flexible work arrangements.

On March 23, 2020 to comply with movement control orders issued by St. Louis County and the State of Missouri, and to protect its workforce and the community at large from the spread of the COVID-19 virus, NPRC reduced its on-site building occupancy to less than 10% of its normal operating capacity.

Throughout the pandemic, as local health conditions fluctuated, occupancy restrictions at the NPRC facility were adjusted. When health conditions improved, on-site occupancy limitations were raised. However, when new variants emerged causing local health conditions to worsen, on-site occupancy limitations were lowered. NARA consulted with experts from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to inform decision making regarding building occupancy limitations. Unfortunately, NPRC's main facility is located in an area which, throughout the pandemic, had one of the highest per capita rates of confirmed COVID-19 cases in St. Louis County. Despite the occupancy limitations discussed above, there have been 332 reported on-site COVID-19 exposures at NPRC's main facility since the start of the pandemic.

### **Improvements Made During the Pandemic**

During the pandemic, NPRC took a number of actions to mitigate COVID-19's impact. It maximized on-site operations while maintaining safe occupancy limits by adding second and third work shifts, and adding shifts on Saturdays, Sundays and select holidays. It also stood up additional locations, using space at the VA Regional Office in St. Louis, Missouri and NPRC's Civilian Personnel Records facility in Valmeyer, Illinois. NARA used the generous funding provided under the COVID Relief and Response Act to support backlog reduction at the NPRC. Thank you very much for your support. The NPRC used this funding to expand the use of contract labor, purchase IT equipment, modernize IT systems, hire additional staff, and for facility improvements to expand operations during the pandemic.

NARA acquired and issued laptop computers to its workforce and modified its network to enable NPRC's production system to be securely accessed remotely. NARA also built and deployed secure digital delivery functionality to enable staff to respond to public requests electronically in instances in which digital records were available.

To expand the number of requests that could be serviced remotely, NPRC used some of its limited on-site capacity to retrieve and digitize records that were responsive to requests in its backlog, enabling remote staff to respond to these requests electronically.

To further expand the volume of requests that could be serviced remotely, NPRC partnered with the VA to digitize military service records. Currently, every time the VA requests a record to support the adjudication of a disability compensation claim, the record is digitized and a copy is

shared with NPRC, allowing NPRC to quickly access the documents in response to future requests.

In addition, a similar process is followed for many of the requests in NPRC's backlog. The responsive analog records are retrieved from storage at NPRC, routed to the VA for digitization, and made available to both agencies.

Furthermore, NPRC continuously collaborates with the VA to review NPRC holdings, identify blocks of records which are highly probable for future claims activity, retrieve and digitize the analog records, and make them available to both agencies. A recent example of this involves the Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act. In advance of the enabling legislation being signed into law, the VA identified approximately 170,000 records in NPRC holdings which were determined to be probable for claims activity after passage of the Act. Between August, 2022 and April, 2023 these records were searched from NPRC holdings, digitized by VA, and the resulting electronic records are now available to the VA and NPRC.

NPRC is supporting the Department of Justice (DOJ) in a similar manner with regard to analog records from NPRC holdings that are responsive to legal demands associated with the Camp Lejeune Justice Act. Analog records requested by the DOJ will be retrieved from storage and routed to VA for digitization. The resulting electronic records will be ingested into a VA system in which DOJ officials will be credentialed to securely receive and download electronic records. These records will also be ingested into NPRC's production system for use should they be responsive to requests received by NPRC in the future.

To support the ingest of these electronic records into NPRC's production system, NARA developed a new registry (VA Records Intake Registry) and refined its automated workflow rules to present (to NPRC technicians) the availability of electronic records in a logical manner when they are responsive to requests received by NPRC.

For a reference transaction to be a candidate for electronic servicing, in addition to the availability of a responsive electronic record, it must also include an email address from the requester. Therefore, during the pandemic, NARA also upgraded its eVetRecs application, an online portal for the public to use to submit requests. Improvements included the use of digital signatures to submit a request, the ability of users to request expedited service for emergency requests, functionality to allow users to return later to check on the status of their request, and a requirement that users provide an email address to ensure the request may be serviced electronically in instances in which a digital record is available.

Another permanent improvement made as a result of the pandemic involves the transition of NPRC's Call Center to a fully remote operation. This was important to do during the pandemic because it provided another way for requesters to reach us regarding emergency requests. The new system uses softphone technology to respond to telephone inquiries and features a call-back

option to reduce long hold times during peak calling periods. Prior to the pandemic, the call center only functioned on premises and the NPRC had to close the call center for inclement weather or other emergencies. Today, the NPRC operates the call center entirely remotely and maintained uninterrupted service during recent weather-related facility closures. We were also able to repurpose the space formerly occupied by the on-site call center to support the expansion of additional staff and contractors required to eliminate the backlog.

### **Current Status**

As a result of the actions described above, NPRC responded to nearly 450,000 requests electronically during FY 2022 and is projected to respond to over 600,000 requests electronically during the current fiscal year. As of June 2023, NPRC has ingested over 16 million electronic files into its production system and is ingesting approximately 15,000 additional electronic files each day. The majority of NPRC's production continues to be accomplished by staff working on-site. Furthermore, as the volume of transactions that are eligible to be serviced electronically continues to increase, they mitigate the risk of large-scale backlog growth should there be another pandemic-like event that restricts access to analog records in the future. It also mitigates production losses due to other, more common emergencies, such as weather-related closures.

The lifting of building occupancy limitations and the return to onsite work in March 2022, coupled with the improvements described above have resulted in significant backlog reduction and greatly improved response times on most reference transactions.

As noted above, NPRC is currently receiving approximately 24,000 new requests each week. This is an increase of 14% compared to its pre-pandemic level of approximately 21,000 requests per week. We attribute the increase in demand to legislative activity (Honoring our Pact Act); improved performance; and improvements made to eVetRecs, such as the use of digital signatures, which make it easier for users to submit requests.

Despite the increase in demand, I am pleased to report that since March, 2022 we have been achieving backlog reduction at an unprecedented rate and are projecting to eliminate the backlog by December, 2023. To be successful, however, we must take additional actions.

### **Additional Actions to Be Taken**

NPRC is continuing to increase its capacity by recruiting additional staff and expanding its use of contract labor support. It has increased its staffing level from 661 at the start of the pandemic to 734 today. It has also increased its use of contract laborers from 30 full time equivalents prior to the pandemic to 90 today. Through on-going recruitment actions, between now and the end of September it plans to add another 98 correspondence technicians. It is also planning to award a new contract that would provide up to 111 additional contract laborers.

To support these additional resources, NPRC is reconfiguring its office space to repurpose common use areas, such as research rooms and lecture rooms for use by correspondence

technicians. Reconfiguring these spaces requires investing in facility improvements to add electrical power, data lines, and furniture. The required building improvements are expected to be completed this summer, to coincide with the onboarding of the additional contract labor support mentioned earlier.

To support the increase in capacity of staff and contractors, NARA conducted an assessment of the training provided to our workforce to ensure that they can provide the best customer service to requesters. Planned improvements include redesigning classroom and online training components to structure a unified model of casework courses and incorporate self-paced training modules.

NARA is currently modernizing the Case Management Reporting System (CMRS). The CMRS system is used by the NPRC to support processing of requests for military service records by veterans, their families, and other members of the public. NARA was awarded a loan under the Technology Modernization Fund to modernize this system. Once deployed, the new system will streamline case processing and improve system reliability.

NARA is also investing in network improvements to support the transition to a digital environment. It is nearing completion of a three-year project to re-architect its wide area network. It is adding a second access point to the internet and re-routing network traffic to reduce latency. Each access point will also serve as a backup to the other in the event of an outage. The modernized network will substantially increase bandwidth, providing 10 gigabytes for NARA with 1 gigabyte dedicated for use by NPRC. These improvements will increase system speed, performance, and reliability. Cutover to the new network is scheduled to be complete in September.

NARA is also exploring the feasibility of applying Robotic Process Automation to NPRC business processes to improve efficiency and accuracy. It awarded a contract to develop potential use cases, engineer a solution, and develop a prototype during the current fiscal year.

NPRC is performing its work today in ways that were unimaginable before the pandemic. NARA has asked a great deal from the NPRC workforce, many of whom are veterans themselves, and they have delivered. Response times on its most frequent and urgent requests have been restored and unprecedented backlog reduction has been achieved.

Earlier this month, for the first time since prior to the pandemic, NPRC hosted an on-site Congressional Open House. More than fifty congressional staff from all over the country traveled to St. Louis to learn about NPRC holdings, observe its work processes first-hand, tour the facility and meet directly with the NPRC workforce. During the event, congressional staff reported significant improvement in NPRC responsiveness.

For the first two years of the pandemic, with each passing week the center experienced backlog growth. Today, with each passing week, another significant stride is made in the right direction and the backlog is further reduced. However, there remains much to be done. NARA's senior leadership, as well as its workforce, are committed to eliminating the backlog as quickly as possible and providing America's veterans with the service they have earned and deserve. The newly confirmed Archivist of the United States, Dr. Colleen Shogan, has made this her top priority, receiving a briefing on the backlog within hours of being sworn in and visiting the NPRC during her first official travel as the Archivist of the United States less than two weeks later.

Throughout the pandemic, NARA provided recurring updates to Congress regarding the situation at NPRC. As required by the FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, NARA will continue to provide quarterly updates to Congress and looks forward to soon reporting the permanent elimination of the backlog and the restoration of prompt reference service on all types of requests submitted to NPRC. We thank the Committee for its interest in this important matter and welcome any suggestions to improve service to America's veterans.