

The Honorable Carolyn Maloney
Chairwoman, House Committee on
Oversight and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Chairman, House Committee on
Appropriations, Subcommittee on
Financial Services and General
Government
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman, House Committee on
Veterans Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Homeland Security and Governmental
Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Kennedy
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Appropriations, Subcommittee on
Financial Services and General
Government
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable James Comer Ranking
Member, House Committee on Oversight
and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Steve Womack
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Appropriations, Subcommittee on
Financial Services and General
Government
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Phil Roe
Ranking Member, House Committee on
Veterans Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Gary Peters
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Homeland Security and Governmental
Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Christopher Coons
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Appropriations, Subcommittee on
Financial Services and General
Government
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Veterans Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Veterans Affairs
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510



9 December 2020

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

I am writing to bring to your attention the serious challenges we face at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The NPRC facility, located in St. Louis, MO, holds over two million cubic feet of military personnel and medical records which only exist in paper form, and cannot be accessed remotely. The NPRC responds to requests from veterans and their families who require copies of their military service records, primarily to prove honorable service in order to claim a service-related benefit. In a typical year, the NPRC responds to more than 1.2 million requests for copies of those records, or over 20,000 requests each week, most of which are completed in under 10 days.

We have not been able to maintain our normal, high level of responsiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have taken a number of actions to protect our workforce from exposure to COVID-19, including reducing the number of employees permitted in our facilities at one time and implementing strict social distancing procedures for on-site work. Unfortunately, these actions have significantly reduced the speed and volume of requests that we can safely process at the NPRC.

Despite the risks of COVID-19, the NPRC has continued to respond to requests for military records throughout the pandemic. From March 23 through November 30, the NPRC responded to nearly 80,000 urgent requests, including over 35,000 burials, assistance for over 6,000 homeless veterans, over 11,000 medical emergencies, and over 26,000 other, time sensitive requests. Unfortunately, these efforts have not been enough to keep pace with the new requests received over the same period, and our backlog of unanswered requests has continued to grow. As of November 30, our backlog totaled 381,000 requests and, if no additional actions are taken, we expect the backlog will grow to 445,000 by the end of 2020.

NARA has already taken several actions to expedite processing of requests and mitigate the growth of the backlog without compromising for the safety of our workforce. Since July, we have expanded the work week at the NPRC to include Saturdays and,

beginning November 30, we implemented a second shift on weekdays, allowing us to double the on-site workforce without exceeding maximum safe occupancy limits. We have partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which has detailed VA employees to the NPRC, to expedite the processing of VA requests for records. We have also deployed new technology to allow our staff to remotely fulfill requests for the small volume of military records that are available electronically and to facilitate veteran self-service where possible.

Unfortunately, we have few other options to mitigate the backlog without Congressional support. The NPRC is funded by the fully cost-reimbursable Records Center Revolving Fund, which is financed by payments from other Federal agencies. Ordinarily, we would fund investments in the NPRC using the cash balance of the Revolving Fund; however, our cash balance has been depleted by COVID-19. Our revenues have been significantly reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but our expenses have not decreased in proportion. We have used our cash balance to maintain our reimbursable operations. As a result, our cash balance has been nearly exhausted, and NARA does not have sufficient funds to make the investments in the NPRC that are necessary to address the backlog during the pandemic.

In fact, NARA has already taken extraordinary administrative actions just to maintain our reimbursable operations. As early as April 2020, we forecasted that the cash balance of the Revolving Fund would be depleted by August 2020, and we would be forced to furlough our entire reimbursable workforce, including the NPRC. In order to avoid furloughs, we added a "COVID-19 surcharge" to the rates we charge other agencies in July 2020. When it became clear that the surcharge would not provide sufficient revenue, we raised our rates again, in October, restructured our fee schedule, and accelerated our billing process, to generate more revenue, and accelerate collections, to avoid furloughs and continue our mission.

The additional revenue we generated by our administrative action is only enough to maintain operations. We will not generate sufficient revenue to recover months of COVID-related financial losses and we cannot restore our depleted cash balance. In fact, we expect our cash balance to continue to decline before stabilizing later in FY 2021. We rely on our cash balance to finance investments and to respond to unexpected expenses. The forecasted cash balance of the Records Center Revolving Fund is not sufficient to provide for the changes necessary to adapt NPRC operations to overcome COVID restrictions, does not allow for needed future investments, and does not provide a sufficient reserve in the event of future, unforeseen events.

We have raised these concerns and gained the support of both the Administration and the Appropriations Committees. The Administration has included funding to re-capitalize the Records Center Revolving Fund in its request for anomalies in the first FY 2021 Continuing Resolution. Congress included funding for the Records Centers Revolving Fund in the Heroes Act (HR 925) and in the Coronavirus Response Additional

Supplemental Appropriations Act (S 4320). Unfortunately, no additional Coronavirus relief measures have been enacted.

As a Vietnam veteran, I am deeply concerned by the COVID-related backlog at the NPRC and the impact it has on my fellow veterans. NARA has identified additional changes that would allow the NPRC to accelerate processing of requests, address the backlog, and maintain appropriate protections for NARA employees, many of whom are also veterans. Unfortunately, the persistent, negative impact of COVID-19 on NARA operations and finances prevents us from implementing these changes within our available resources.

I appreciate the attention that you and your colleagues have already provided, highlighting this issue in your letters and other communications. I look forward to continuing conversations on the impact that COVID-19 has had on NARA and the NPRC. I appreciate your continued support for NARA's mission and the services we proudly provide to America's veterans and their families.

If you have any questions, please contact NARA's Director of Congressional Affairs, John Hamilton, at 202-357-6832 or at John.Hamilton@NARA.Gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David S. Ferriero", with a stylized, flowing script.

DAVID S. FERRIERO
Archivist of the United States