

TESTIMONY OF SCOTT LEVINS
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY,
HOMELAND DEFENSE, AND FOREIGN OPERATIONS,
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
ON
“PREVENTING STOLEN VALOR: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS”

FEBRUARY 29, 2012

Good morning Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Tierney, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for calling this hearing and for your attention to issues surrounding the management of records which document the service of our nation’s veterans. I am proud to represent the staff of the National Personnel Records Center, many of whom are veterans themselves, and pleased to appear before you today to discuss the work that the National Personnel Records Center does to serve those who have served. We appreciate your interest in this important work.

The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC or Center) is an office of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Located in multiple facilities in the St. Louis area, the Center stores and services over 4 million cubic feet of military and civilian personnel, medical and related records dating back to the Spanish-American War. In 2000, Congress provided NARA with a revolving fund that allows NARA’s Records Center Program, including the NPRC, to function on a cost-reimbursable basis. Accordingly, NPRC no longer receives annual appropriations for its Records Center Program, and instead charges each agency the full cost of servicing their records.

As the Subcommittee’s interest lies in military awards and decorations, my testimony will focus on NPRC’s role in managing military service records.

History of NPRC’s Military Records Program

In the mid 1950s, the Department of Defense constructed the Military Personnel Records Center in Overland, Missouri. In the years that followed, military personnel, medical, and organizational records of each military service department were relocated to this facility. In 1960, the Center’s functions were consolidated and transferred to the General Services Administration, to be managed by NARA’s predecessor agency, the National Archives and

Records Service (NARS), as a single program, leveraging economies of scale to improve efficiency and offering a central point of access for military service records.

When the Military Personnel Records Center was constructed in the 1950s, it was not equipped with a fire suppression system. In 1973, a massive fire at the Center destroyed 16-18 million records documenting the military service of Army and Air Force veterans who separated between 1912 and 1964. Though the fire occurred almost forty years ago, the Center continues to service approximately 200,000 requests per year which pertain to records lost in the fire. When responding to fire-related requests, technicians attempt to reconstruct the basic service record by using auxiliary records such as pay vouchers and/or by obtaining documents from other official sources. Though the Center is normally able to reconstruct basic service data, it is often impossible to reconstruct complete records of awards and decorations.

Last year, NPRC's military records facility began a relocation into a new building designed to meet updated facility standards for storing permanent Federal records. The facility is located in North St. Louis County, approximately 15 miles from the Overland location. The relocation of records into the new facility is expected to be completed by the end of September 2012.

Ownership of Records

In the late 1990s, NARA determined that Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) records were of enduring, archival value warranting permanent retention in the National Archives of the United States. As part of the appraisal process in preparing a formal records disposition schedule for OMPFs, NARA worked with the Department of Defense (DoD) and the military services to determine the appropriate "offer date": that is the date on which a permanent series of records becomes eligible to be offered by an agency for legal transfer to NARA. NARA, DoD and the military service departments agreed to fund a study to examine a sample of requests for military personnel records and correlate the purpose of each request with the veteran's year of separation. The survey found that on average, sixty-two years after a service member completes his/her obligated service, the purpose for which his/her records is referenced changes from a primary use (such as pursuit of an entitlement) to a secondary use (such as scholarly research or genealogy). Based upon that study, in 2004 the OMPF series was formally scheduled for permanent retention, with the legal transfer of ownership to NARA to occur 62 years after the completion of a member's obligated service.

When records have been transferred to the legal custody of the National Archives, they become available with fewer restrictions to public researchers. They also become subject to a public fee schedule. However, NPRC waives fees related to service records in instances where the requester indicates that the records are needed to pursue any type of benefit derived from the veterans' military service. Statistical data indicates that NPRC waives fees in approximately 60% of the instances where archival records are requested, indicating higher than expected primary use for benefit-related inquiries.

Funding NPRC Services

From the time NARA assumed responsibility for managing the Military Personnel Records Center in 1960 through Fiscal Year 1999, the Center was funded through annual appropriations for NARA's operating expenses. In Fiscal Year 1999, Congress established an inter-agency revolving fund to finance NARA records center storage and related services. The Records Center Revolving Fund (codified in the note accompanying 44 U.S.C. § 2901) allows NARA to operate our network of Federal Records Centers, including NPRC, in a business-like manner. NARA pays for the operating costs of our Federal Records Centers from the revolving fund and then recovers those costs by charging federal agencies for the full cost of the records storage and related services that they consume. Our customer Federal agencies pay the Records Center Revolving Fund from their appropriations. The revolving fund structure allows the government to benefit from the economies of scale that come from centralized records storage facilities.

Accordingly, since Fiscal Year 2000, the military services must reimburse NARA for most of the costs of operating the military personnel records facility. NARA charges the military services for storage and related services for records less than 62 years old, which are in NARA's physical custody but are legally owned by the services. NARA does not charge the services for the storage and servicing of military records older than 62 years, which are owned by NARA. NPRC staff continue to provide reference service on the holdings after transfer, but NARA, rather than the military service, is charged to recover the costs of providing the reference services. NARA reimburses the NPRC from annual appropriations for that purpose, and is charged the same rates that are charged to the military departments for these services.

Currently, NARA furnishes its customer agencies a detailed invoice on a monthly basis listing work volumes and charges for each service provided. The bulk of the cost of operating NPRC is related to responding to personnel-related correspondence requests. NPRC services more than one million such requests annually and currently charges \$33.00 to service each of these correspondence requests.

Additional fees may be charged for the retrieval of a record from storage (\$3.00 per search) and the return of the record to storage (\$2.20 per refile) if necessary. Search and refile fees are not charged when electronic records are referenced.

Process Improvements

To improve efficiency and service delivery, in the early 2000s NPRC embarked on a multi-year business process re-engineering project (BPR) that featured the deployment of modern technology to automate processes and expand citizen access, and required its workforce to participate in re-training.

Innovations included web portals for public and Federal agency requesters, extensive request and record tracking, automated work assignments, automated request servicing, a unique, career advancement program that requires passage of competency exercises as a pre-requisite to promotion, and an innovative, competitive incentive program.

Today, approximately 45% of our public requests are received electronically and over 8,000 Federal employees at agencies such as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and the Social Security Administration (SSA) electronically interface with NPRC from their desktops to obtain the information they need to, for example, adjudicate medical claims for disabled veterans, conduct background checks for security clearances, and process claims for social security benefits.

In the years that followed the BPR, NPRC has achieved a significant reduction in the backlog and has greatly improved its response times. The average turnaround of a completed request was reduced from 76 days in 2002 to 10 days (achieved during the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2012). Overall customer satisfaction with the handling of requests improved from 78% of respondents indicating either “mostly” or “completely” satisfied during the summer of 2002 to over 90% in the summer of 2011.

Servicing Reference Requests

Today NPRC holds approximately 60 million official military personnel files. Its holdings also include service treatment records, clinical records from military medical treatment facilities, auxiliary records such as pay vouchers and service name indexes, and organizational records such as morning reports and unit rosters. NPRC stores these records in both textual and micrographic formats.

NPRC’s military records facility receives between 4,000 and 5,000 correspondence requests each day from veterans, their next of kin, various Federal agencies, members of Congress, the media, and other stakeholders. It responds to 74% of these requests in ten business days or less. Nearly half of these requests come from veterans seeking a copy of their separation statement (the DD-214) because they need it to pursue a benefit. The Center responds to 93% of these types of requests in ten business days or less.

In servicing correspondence requests, NARA technicians must verify the authorization of the requester; identify the responsive record; extract, print or copy the responsive documents or information; redact third party personal privacy information often prevalent in these records; certify reproductions as authentic by applying a raised seal; generate a response letter (using pattern paragraphs to simplify the process); and prepare the documents for mailing.

Requests for Military Awards and Decorations

Regarding requests for military awards and decorations, NPRC does not issue service medals. However, for cases involving Air Force and Army veterans, the NPRC staff review the records, find the awards listed, send a response back to the veteran listing the awards, and initiate an order with the Army or Air Force to have the actual awards mailed to the veteran. For veterans of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, the requests are referred for action to a Navy office which is co-located in the same facility. During FY 2011, NPRC responded to approximately 67,000 requests for military awards and decorations, which represented 6% of its overall correspondence volume.

NPRC also responds to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for records of all the military services. During FY 2011, NPRC responded to a total of over 16,000 FOIA requests and responded to 98% of them in twenty business days or less. Some of these requests come from interested third parties wishing to verify a veteran's awards and decorations, and we are able to release information about the awards and decorations earned by a veteran while in service.

In addition to the correspondence work discussed above, the Center receives between 5,000 and 7,000 requests each week from the Department of Veterans Affairs and other Federal agencies requiring the temporary loan of original records. These requests are normally serviced within two business days.

The NPRC No Longer Stores all Military Personnel-Related Records

In instances where NPRC is unable to respond promptly to a request, the biggest obstacle is normally our inability to retrieve the responsive record. For example, delays may be experienced if a record is currently charged out to another office, or undergoing extensive preservation treatment (e.g., because of the 1973 fire). Sometimes it is because the requested records are not located at the NPRC. Despite the original idea in 1960 for the NPRC to serve as the sole central repository for information needed to verify veterans' rights and benefits, beginning in the early 1990s, the military service departments stopped retiring medical records, now called service treatment records, to NPRC and instead retired them directly to the VA. As a result, the NPRC does not have direct access to modern service treatment records. This change was implemented by the Army in 1992; the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps in 1994; and the Coast Guard in 1998.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the military service departments also stopped retiring official military personnel files to NPRC, instead retaining them in-house in electronic formats. This change was implemented by the Navy in 1995; the Marine Corps in 1999; the Army in 2002; and the Air Force in 2004. The Coast Guard continues to retire hardcopy personnel records to NPRC.

The electronic personnel records systems employed by the military services vary, but the Department of Defense maintains a web-based application called the Defense Personnel Records Information Retrieval System (DPRIS), which acts as a conduit to retrieve imaged documents from each of the Services' electronic systems. DPRIS is maintained by the Personnel and Readiness Information Management (P&R IM) Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) ((OUSD (P&R))).

The military services use their electronic personnel records systems to respond to routine correspondence requests from veterans and other stakeholders. With the exception of the Department of the Army, the NPRC refers correspondence requests for these records to the appropriate military department for servicing.

In 2007, the Department of the Army entered into an agreement with NARA to allow NPRC to access DPRIS to retrieve electronic personnel records for the purpose of responding to routine

correspondence requests from veterans and other stakeholders. As a result of that decision, NPRC referrals to the Department of the Army were reduced by approximately 2,500 requests per month.

The Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps continue to service their own personnel records and respond to routine correspondence requests from veterans and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

NARA is eager to work with the Subcommittee and other stakeholders to explore opportunities to better serve our nation's veterans. We invite the Subcommittee members to visit NPRC. We welcome suggestions to improve service and efficiency and we again extend our sincere thanks to the Subcommittee for expressing such great interest in the services NPRC provides. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Scott Levins serves as Director at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis. NPRC holds over 56 million military personnel records and responds to ~ 25,000 requests each week. Mr. Levins has been with NARA for 22 years, the last ten of which have been at NPRC. Prior to coming to NPRC, he served as a Management and Program Analyst for the Office of Regional Records Services in College Park; the Director of the Pittsfield FRC in NARA's Northeast Region; a Management Analyst in the Central Office of Federal Records Centers in Washington, DC; a Team Lead in the Micrographics and Reproductions Branch at the Washington National Records Center; and as a Management Intern at the Chicago Federal Records Center. He has an undergraduate degree in Business Administration from Saint Xavier University in Chicago and an Executive MBA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.