

National Archives and Records Administration
Plan to Eliminate Records Backlog at the National Personnel Records Center
February 24, 2023

This report responds to language in section 5301 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (P.L. 117-263):

(a) PLAN TO ELIMINATE RECORDS BACKLOG AT THE NATIONAL PERSONNEL RECORDS CENTER.—

(1) PLAN REQUIRED.—Not later than 60 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Archivist of the United States shall submit to the appropriate congressional committees a comprehensive plan for reducing the backlog of requests for records from the National Personnel Records Center and improving the efficiency and responsiveness of operations at the National Personnel Records Center, that includes, at a minimum, the following:

- (A) An estimate of the number of backlogged record requests for veterans.
- (B) Target timeframes to reduce the backlog.
- (C) A detailed plan for using existing funds to improve the information technology infrastructure, including secure access to appropriate agency Federal records, to prevent future backlogs.
- (D) Actions to improve customer service for requesters.
- (E) Measurable goals with respect to the comprehensive plan and metrics for tracking progress toward such goals.
- (F) Strategies to prevent future record request backlogs, including backlogs caused by an event that prevents employees of the Center from reporting to work in person.

Background

The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) located in St. Louis, MO, is a part of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The NPRC stores and provides access to more than 2 million cubic feet of records documenting U.S. military service of American veterans of all branches of service. Each year, the NPRC responds to around 1.1 million requests for military service records from veterans and their families, or more than 4,000 requests per workday. The majority of NPRC records are only available in hard copy and can only be accessed in person, by NARA staff.

During the first two years of the pandemic, NARA accumulated a large backlog of unanswered requests for military service records. NPRC never fully closed during the pandemic; however, on-site production was significantly curtailed due to quarantines and on-site staffing limits that were imposed to protect staff from COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic, NPRC staff continued to work on-site to service its most urgent requests, such as those involving burials for

deceased veterans, medical emergencies, and homeless veterans seeking shelter. The NPRC maximized its on-site operations within occupancy limits by adding second and third work shifts, adding shifts on Saturdays and Sundays, and standing up additional locations to maximize output while maintaining safe levels of onsite staffing during the pandemic.

A. An estimate of the number of backlogged record requests for veterans.

As of February 13, 2023, the total count of unanswered requests for military service records at the NPRC stood at 404,000. This number includes backlogged (overdue) requests as well as new requests received within the 20 workday deadline for response. This is a reduction of 200,000 or 33 percent from its peak of 604,000 in March 2022. Since April 1, 2022, the NPRC has responded to almost 1.1 million requests for military service records, including both new and backlogged records requests.

The backlog of unanswered, *overdue* records requests is approximately 338,000. This number is the count of requests that have not been responded to within the 20 workday response period. This number excludes requests received within the past 20 workdays.

The NPRC has already completely 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 within 20 days or less. DD 214 requests represent approximately 60 percent of all requests received and are most often needed by veterans and their dependents to prove eligibility for military and veterans' benefits. NPRC prioritizes these requests ahead of all other requests for military service records.

The backlog of overdue, unanswered requests is made up entirely of requests for records *other than DD 214s*. "Other" requests are more complex than DD 214 requests and normally require extensive redaction of third-party personal data or substantial research of secondary sources in order to collect responsive information. This category also includes many requests which require the reconstruction of records lost in the [1973 fire](#). Due to complexity, these records take much longer to respond to when compared to DD 214 requests.

B. Target timeframes to eliminate the backlog.

NARA expects to eliminate the remaining backlog of requests for military service records by December 2, 2023. While service has been restored to pre-pandemic levels for veterans seeking separation documents, the remainder of the backlog represents our most complex cases. Nevertheless, we are committed to eliminating the backlog and restoring pre-pandemic response times as soon as possible. NARA has already expanded off-site operations, made significant investments in information technology, and substantially increased the workforce to maximize production and address the backlog. The NPRC will continue to maintain second, third, and weekend work shifts until the backlog is eliminated. We continue to expand our workforce by hiring even more staff and acquiring additional contractor support for NPRC operations.

C. A detailed plan for using existing funds to improve the information technology infrastructure, including secure access to appropriate agency Federal records, to prevent future backlogs.

NARA has allocated funding for several initiatives that will transform paper-based processes for fulfilling customer requests for paper records into fully electronic processes that rapidly deliver digitized copies to customers through secure, accessible web portals.

- *Digitized Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF)* – NARA has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to digitize the military service records of all living veterans. The Veterans Benefits Administration is using funding provided in the American Rescue Plan Act to accelerate the extraction, scanning, and digitization of OMPFs. NARA developed functionality to ingest digitized records from the VA into NPRC’s production system.

NARA has allocated \$600 thousand in FY 2023 for the transfer and maintenance of digitized records from the VA. Digitized records are maintained in NARA’s cloud workspace where NARA staff can access VA images files and conduct day-to-day processing of veteran requests.

- *Modernization of 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 \(TMF\)](#) to modernize CMRS. NARA will use TMF funds to develop a new system, utilizing Enterprise Customer Relationship Management (ECRM) software deployed in a secure Cloud hosting environment. ECRM will provide for faster case processing, modern features and capabilities, and will allow for fully-electronic processing of service records that have been digitized by the VA.

NARA has allocated \$7,100 thousand towards the modernization of CMRS in FY 2023. This includes development costs which are covered by the loan NARA received from the TMF and the initial configuration of a Cloud-Access Secure Broker (CASB) to ensure the security of digitized records maintained in NARA’s cloud environment. NARA will allocate additional funds to implement secure user authentication for the public using the government-wide authentication service Login.gov. This modernization also includes funding to develop Robotic Process Automation (RPA) solutions to expedite responses to requests for separation documents (DD 214).

- *Electronic Processing of Requests* – NARA has allocated \$400 thousand to support the electronic processing of requests. This includes the purchase of laptop computers and peripheral equipment to enable staff to service requests electronically in instances where digital records are available. Funding also provides for the support of eVetRecs, an online portal for the submission of requests. Improvements have been made to eVetRecs that allow for digital signatures by requesters, electronic status checks, and the submission of emergency reference requests. Funding also supports a remote call center using softphone

technology. During the pandemic, NARA established a remote call center to respond to customer requests using softphone technology.

In FY 2024 NARA will allocate funding for the upgrade to our infrastructure to support the increase in digitized records, electronic and remote processing of requests, or the deployment of a modernized CMRS. NARA will also provide increases to deploy virtual servers, increase cloud-storage, expand bandwidth, support remote access, data center upgrades, and replace end-of-life hardware to improve operations at the NPRC.

D. Actions to improve customer service for requesters.

The NPRC has already completed several initiatives to improve customer service for requesters.

- Upgraded eVetRecs, an online portal for the submission of requests, to allow for digital signatures by requesters, electronic status checks, and the submission of emergency reference requests. Prior to the pandemic, all requesters were required to submit copies of their signature by fax, and emergency requests could only be submitted on paper forms. Today, veterans and their families can request copies of the military records entirely online, including emergency requests.
- Built and deployed secure digital delivery functionality to enable staff to respond to public requests electronically in instances where digital records are available, and requesters have submitted an email address with their request. Prior to the pandemic, the NPRC provided responsive records to requestors only in hard copy, through the mail. Today, NPRC provides secure, electronic copies of military service records to requestors who provide an email address.
- Established a remote NPRC Call Center using softphone technology to ensure continuity of services. Requesters contact the NPRC Call Center to check the status of their request. 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.
- Established a [web page](#) at Archives.gov to provide congressional caseworkers with helpful information for assisting constituents with NPRC inquiries.

NARA is also currently modernizing the Case Management Reporting System (CMRS), system used to support processing of requests, and once complete it will streamline case processing and increase system resilience, substantially reducing cycle time and increasing customer satisfaction.

NARA recently performed 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 in the process of hiring additional staff and acquiring additional contract support to address the backlog. These additional resources will improve customer service with the decrease in response times and the eventual elimination of the backlog.

E. Measurable goals with respect to the comprehensive plan and metrics for tracking progress toward such goals.

NARA estimates that the backlog of other requests will be eliminated by December 2, 2023. NARA is currently expanding capacity with additional staff and contractor support to address the backlog. As additional resources are added, productivity will continue to increase.

The table below reflects our milestones and targets for reducing and eventually eliminating the backlog of other requests.

	Backlog	Target Date
Current	338,000	
25% Reduction	253,500	July 2023
50% Reduction	169,000	September 2023
75% Reduction	84,500	October 2023
Backlog Eliminated	0	December 2, 2023

F. Strategies to prevent future record request backlogs, including backlogs caused by an event that prevents employees of the Center from reporting to work in person.

Prior to the pandemic, NPRC staff did not have the capability to service requests remotely and telework was not available to most NPRC staff. As staff had to be on-site to work with the paper records, our ability to process citizen requests was severely diminished whenever access to the facility was limited.

During the pandemic, NARA deployed a large number of improvements to technology and business processes so that we could maintain mission-critical operations at the NPRC with a remote workforce. NARA worked with our partners at the VA to digitize all incoming paper mail and modified our online request system, eVetRecs, to allow veterans and their families to request their records fully electronically. NARA is also working in partnership with the VA to systematically digitize the military personnel records of all living veterans and have deployed our own small-scale digitization capabilities in the NPRC. New, secure capabilities have allowed our technicians to search our growing repository of digitized veteran records, find responsive records, and deliver the results remotely, from outside of our facility. NARA has used softphone technology to stand up a fully functional, remote call center. Desktop computers have been replaced with laptops for all employees, all file storage has been migrated from on-

premises servers to cloud storage, and investments in system modernization will provide for greater speed and efficiency in operations.

The investments made in remote work have substantially improved NARA's mission resilience. Our remote work functionality allows our staff to work from home in conditions that would otherwise stop production. For example, in a recent weather emergency, NPRC staff responded to more than 4,000 requests while working remotely, whereas prior to the pandemic the Center would have closed for the entire day and output would have been zero.