

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 14, 2020

Director Scott Levins
National Personnel Records Center
National Archives and Records Administration
1 Archives Drive
St. Louis, MO 63138-1002

Dear Director Levins:

I write to request additional information regarding the efforts of the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) to process veterans' records requests. The NPRC plays a critical role in maintaining the personnel, health, and medical records of millions of veterans, and while I appreciate efforts to safely reopen the NPRC in St. Louis, I am concerned about how the significant continuing delays in processing many records requests are affecting veterans.

After sacrificing so much in defense of our freedom, veterans should receive the support that they need and have earned in a timely manner, including all of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits they are eligible to receive. To receive these benefits, the VA must obtain the necessary documentation to demonstrate the veteran's eligibility, most notably military separation documents such as the Department of Defense Form 214. In maintaining and providing military personnel records such as military separation documents, the NPRC serves as an essential part of the VA benefit claims process.

I respect and appreciate your efforts to protect the health and safety of your own employees, which is paramount. I encourage you to put in place a comprehensive plan that protects the health of your workforce, while allowing you to resume your important mission.

Unfortunately, my office has heard from many Granite State veterans of VA benefits claims stuck in limbo for months due to unprocessed requests for military personnel records at the NPRC. With the NPRC only processing a few types of requests, countless veterans cannot move forward with their VA benefits claims. Such delays can cause potentially irreparable harm to veterans' health and financial well-being, because veterans are unable to access the benefits they deserve.

For this reason, I encourage the NPRC to take all necessary steps to safely process military personnel records requests in an expeditious manner.

The public health emergency caused by COVID-19 has also underscored the need to digitize records so that they may be accessed remotely. While some modern service records are available in an electronic format, many others are accessible only as physical copies. This antiquated system has seriously hampered the ability of many veterans to receive key documents from the NPRC. As the NPRC continues to reopen, I urge you to consider bolstering any ongoing digitization efforts to mitigate situations like this going forward.

I hope that the NPRC will take all measures to safely resume the processing of all military personnel records requests by veterans, especially Department of Defense Form 214's. As such, I request additional information on the NPRC's plans to process records requests by veterans:

1. What is your current capacity to process military personnel records requests?
2. What is the current backlog of records requests by veterans, particularly for Department of Defense Form 214 requests?
3. Is the NPRC currently fulfilling VA requests for records needed to adjudicate benefit claims?
4. How does the NPRC plan to work through this backlog as expeditiously as possible while still maintaining the safety of its employees?
5. How is the NPRC utilizing digital records or record management systems to remotely process this backlog of requests by veterans? Does the NPRC have plans to modernize its record management systems or move to a fully digital platform? Please include any modernization plans as an attachment to your response.
6. Why is the NPRC's customer service phone line currently unstaffed? When is this phone line expected to become operational again?
7. What resources or authorities could Congress provide to better facilitate the safe resumption of operations at the NPRC in St. Louis so that it can process the current backlog of record requests by veterans?

Again, thank you for your continued efforts to respond to the needs of our veterans. It is clear that more work remains to be done as we grapple with the latest challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, but I remain committed to continuing to work with you and the rest of the NPRC to safely facilitate continued reopening efforts.

With every good wish,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Maggie Hassan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator