



VA, HHS to Vaccinate NARA National Personnel Records Center Staff

May 12, 2021

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) [reached an agreement](#) with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Health and Human Services for supply and administration of coronavirus vaccine to protect NARA employees involved in the processing of military personnel records. This agreement is designed to help NARA staff enter the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) and retrieve physical documents involved in verifying veteran and military benefits claims. As of March 8, 2021, the NPRC reports that its backlog of records requests was [more than 480,000](#).

This Insight explains the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on records access from the NPRC; the typical means of servicemember and constituent access to records; and efforts at NARA, the Department of Defense (DOD), and VA to digitize records to improve remote accessibility to information. It concludes with policy options for Congress to address the records request backlog.

Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic on Records Access

The [NPRC](#), which is part of NARA, is the central repository for the federal government's military and civil service personnel-related records. The NPRC holds more than [4 million cubic feet](#) of records and stores these documents [permanently](#) in accordance with the Federal Records Act (44 U.S.C. Chapters 21, 29, 31, and 33). NARA manages an individual's records 62 years after the servicemember's separation from the military. Prior to that, records are under the purview of DOD and VA.

Due to the pandemic, all NARA research rooms, libraries, and museums [have been closed](#) to the public. The NPRC continues to service only [urgent records requests](#) related to homeless veterans, medical emergencies, and funerals. NARA has suspended [reproduction and digitization services](#) due to the pandemic until further notice.

NARA [notes](#), "The biggest obstacle to returning NPRC's performance to its pre-pandemic level lies in the reality that the majority of NPRC's holdings and reference activity involve paper records that can be accessed only by on-site staff." The NPRC announced it would be expanding its on-site workforce to [20 percent](#) at its location in St. Louis, MO, in light of improving local conditions. While this figure is less than NPRC's pre-pandemic capacity, it reflects an increase in personnel from its [early pandemic reduction](#).

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11668

Access to Service Records

In addition to requesting records from the NPRC, servicemembers and constituents may be able to request information from DOD and VA, depending on the circumstances.

[DOD Instruction Number 5015.02](#) provides department-wide records management procedures on servicemember records preservation. Certain servicemembers who discharged from the [Army](#), [Navy](#), [Marines](#), [Air Force](#), or [Coast Guard](#) may be eligible to request their records directly from DOD.

VA is [required by statute](#) to assist veterans in developing their claims for benefits. This “[Duty to Assist](#)” can apply to accessing records from either federal or non-federal entities. This authority is typically used in assisting a veteran in filing a claim for disability compensation, disability pension, health care, or [burial](#), among other VA benefits. Besides contacting DOD for a veteran’s personnel file, VA can also directly contact NPRC for records.

Digitization Efforts

Government-wide efforts to digitize paper records to [increase remote accessibility](#) are ongoing. The Office of Management and Budget and NARA [announced](#) the implementation of electronic recordkeeping guidance in 2018, and NARA will end its acceptance of paper records for archiving [after December 31, 2022](#).

Currently, DOD is enhancing its digital capabilities for DOD records to interface with VA, including those records for servicemembers who separated prior to the use of electronic health records. In [a 2014 report to Congress](#), DOD explained that it is scanning [Service Treatment Records](#) from January 1, 2014, and beyond into a system that is designed to share data with VA. Some records prior to 2014 have also been scanned, including some records that were not retired and sent to NPRC.

Congress has pushed for digitizing the DD-214 form, which records a servicemember’s separation. Section 569 of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92) requires that DOD provide veterans and former servicemembers with a machine-readable and electronically transferable DD-214 form by [December 31, 2023](#).

In September 2020, in response to the passage of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-23), VA completed a [digitization program](#) of 1,800 deck logs of naval vessels that served in the Vietnam War. VA [entered into an agreement](#) with NARA to digitize these documents, which comprise approximately 29 million images, and has already helped over 25,000 Vietnam veterans receive VA benefits.

Recently, Congress appropriated [\\$50 million](#) (to remain available until September 30, 2022) to NARA via the Records Center Revolving Fund in the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260) to offset the loss of user fees collected by the fund as a result of the pandemic. According to [a bipartisan letter](#) to President Biden and the U.S. Archivist, as of April 5, 2021, \$15 million from this funding has been allocated to NPRC.

Issues for Congress

Given Congress’s recent appropriation of funds to address NPRC pandemic operations, Members might consider the following additional questions in response to the records request backlog:

- In light of NARA’s goal of accepting only digital records by the end of 2022, are DOD and VA prepared to provide digital files? How should monetary and professional resources be leveraged to accomplish this goal?

-
- Should servicemember information be retrieved by a form identifier (e.g., by looking through all DD-214s), or should information be retrieved by a servicemember-specific identifier?
- Is communication among DOD, VA, and NPRC sufficient? How can it be improved?

Author Information

Heather M. Salazar
Analyst in Veterans Policy

Meghan M. Stuessy
Analyst in Government Organization and Management

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.