Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 5, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable David S. Ferriero
Archivist of the United States
The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Road College Park, MD 20740-6001

Dear President Biden and Mr. Ferriero,

We respectfully request for your administration to take immediate action to eliminate the records request backlog at The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). As of March 8, 2021, the NPRC had an approximate backlog of 480,000 record requests from veterans and their families.[1] Without these records, veterans cannot access the essential services they have earned while defending our country. Records at the NPRC are required for veterans to receive COVID-19 vaccinations from the VA, GI Bill education benefits, VA loans, medical benefits, burial benefits, disability compensation, life insurance, and other services. We ask that your administration use every available resource to ensure our nation's veterans retain access to these vital services while waiting for their records.

Hospitals around the country have continuously operated throughout the pandemic because they provide essential services. The NPRC is equally important. Without the records it provides, veterans are deprived of Veterans Health Administration services, from routine preventative care to cancer treatment or mental health services. The administration must confront the reality that the NPRC's operation is essential and must ensure that it reopens immediately and operates at its maximum capacity—just as hospitals, drug manufacturers, and grocery stores have done throughout the pandemic.

COVID-19 has created unprecedented issues for our federal agencies. We understand the challenges the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has faced to ensure its employees' safety while continuing the operation of its services. In Mr. Ferriero's December 10, 2020 letter to Congress, he outlined the NPRC's COVID-19 response measures:

> "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."[2]

Despite these measures, the NPRC backlog has only continued to grow. Overall, NARA's response has been insufficient to solve the problem.

On December 27, 2020, President Trump signed H.R.133, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which included $50 million in emergency appropriations for the NARA Revolving Fund. The NPRC received $15 million from this funding source to reduce the records request backlog, deploy resources for staff to work remotely, and hire temporary employees. These funds prevented NARA from furloughing employees at record centers, including the NPRC, yet the backlog has only grown. Additionally, the NPRC is not operating its call center. Attempts to call the emergency contact number have resulted in a busy signal, and the NPRC's customer service line is simply unstaffed.

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[1]https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2021/nr21-30
[2]Ferriero, David S. Archivist of the United States. Letter to Congress. 10 December 2020.

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While we are pleased that NARA has announced an expansion of on-site workers at NPRC by March 18, we would still like to see a full commitment to reopening at 100% capacity and a plan to reduce the records backlog. The backlog at the NPRC and its response to COVID-19 are an unacceptable disservice to those who bravely served our country. To ensure that we are fulfilling our obligations to our nation's veterans, we ask the following:

1. We ask that the Biden Administration take every available action to reopen the NPRC, including:
    a. Coordinate with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and NARA to prioritize employees at the NPRC for vaccinations and to report to Congress on NPRC's plans to reopen based on staff vaccinations.
    b. Evaluate the feasibility of the NPRC's staff working overtime and in continuous shifts until the backlog is eliminated. We ask that the shifts consist of the maximum number of employees as is consistent with the appropriate safety guidelines.
    c. We ask that the NPRC implement this work schedule or send a report to Congress outlining the resources it will need to implement such a schedule by April 30, 2021.
    d. We ask that the NPRC work with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, and other agencies to increase the number of workers at the NPRC.
    e. We ask that NARA explore the option to work with government contractors to increase the number of workers at the NPRC.
2. The Department of Homeland Security's "Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce" identifies workers required for administrative operations for direct patient care as essential healthcare workers.[3] We ask that NARA similarly treat the NPRC employees as essential healthcare workers for the purposes of COVID-19 vaccinations, testing, and access to personal protective equipment.
3. We ask that the administration reevaluate or establish safety guidelines specific to the NPRC's circumstances and provide Congress with the exact reopening guidelines.
4. We ask that the NPRC staff its call center or provide Congress with a report outlining the resources it will need to staff its call center.
5. For the purposes of granting VA burial services, we ask that the VA accept materials that can reasonably be used to verify a veteran's service record including service awards, VHA service cards, or a signed affidavit from fellow soldiers or the veteran's family to verify their service.

We cannot allow our nation's veterans to die while waiting for a piece of paper to prove they are entitled to medical services. We cannot continue to abandon military families arranging burial services for their family members. The United States government must correct this injustice.

We look forward to seeing a swift, effective, and permanent solution to this problem.

Sincerely,

Warren Davidson
Member of Congress

Deborah K. Ross
Member of Congress

Mike Bost
Ranking Member
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

[3]https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ECIW_4.0_Guidance_on_Essential_Critical_Infrastructure_Workers_Final3_508_0.pdf

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