



August 22, 2022

The Hon. Jack Reed  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. James Inhofe  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Reed and Ranking Member Inhofe,

On July 14, by an overwhelming bi-partisan vote of 406-21, the House passed [HR 7337, the "Access for Veterans to Records Act."](#) The bill was also included as an amendment (Section 5832, Access for Veterans to Records) to the House-passed version of the National Defense Reauthorization Act (HR 7900). We urge you to include that section in S. 4543, the "James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal year 2023 (NDAA)" or to agree to the House language in conference.

The bill is designed to address the continuing backlog of over 500,000 records requests from veterans still pending at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis. Because of the pandemic, the NPRC was closed for two years due to legitimate concerns for the health and safety of staff of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) which operates the facility. The NPRC only returned to full in-person staffing on March 7, 2022.

Recently, [Acting Archivist of the United States Debra Wall sent a letter](#) to the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee providing an update on the ongoing work to eliminate the backlog. While the backlog is slowly decreasing from its peak of 603,000, it is notable that NARA was unable to provide an estimate as to when they will be able to clear the outstanding requests which are estimated at approximately 500,000.

As you know, veterans rely on their service records to prove eligibility for medical treatment, unemployment assistance, housing, and many other benefits. Sadly, this included eligibility for military funerals for the many elderly veterans who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation is not just a mere inconvenience for our veterans and their families. Congress needs to act as soon as possible to make this right.

The bill has two components. First, it requires the National Archives to provide its congressional appropriations and authorizing committees with a detailed plan and target timeframes to eliminate the backlog and strategies to prevent a future records requests backlog. This includes submitting biannual status updates on the backlog and maintaining staffing levels to meet the goal of responding to 90 percent of requests in 20 days or less.

Second, the bill would authorize \$60 million for NARA to modernize its information technology infrastructure. The upgrades are necessary for NARA to improve its ability to digitize documents

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and to prevent future bottlenecks. A large volume of veterans' records are only available on paper which has made it more difficult to respond to requests quickly.

The \$60 million can be used not just to address the veterans' records backlog. The funds can also be used to "improve cybersecurity, improve digital preservation and access to archival Federal records, and address backlogs in requests made under the Freedom of Information Act. Such amounts may also be used for the Federal Records Center Program."

NARA's operating expenses (OE) budget has remained stagnant for more than a decade at a time when the transition to use of electronic records by federal agencies is well underway. Investment in human capital, including professional archivists, is vital for providing an elevated level of service to the public. For too long Congress and the administrations of both parties have, unfortunately, viewed NARA as serving a mere housekeeping function, rather than as a vital agency that ensures transparency, efficiency, and historical documentation for the nation.

NARA's FY 22 operating expenses budget is \$388 million, which is only \$3 million more than the FY 18 level of \$385 million. The FY 23 budget for NARA recently released by Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Leahy would only increase the agency's budget by \$32 million. This amount is hardly enough to keep pace with inflation and NARA's existing responsibilities. An infusion of additional funding is needed for NARA to address the backlog at the NPRC. We need to ensure that NARA has the resources and support to modernize systems and process requests so that veterans can gain access to their records in an expeditious manner, preventing comparable backlog in the future.

The National Coalition for History (NCH) is a consortium of 43 organizations that advocates and educates on federal legislative and regulatory issues affecting historians, archivists, political scientists, documentary editors, teachers, students, genealogists, and other stakeholders. As researchers, teachers, and conservators of American history and culture, we care deeply about the programs and activities of the National Archives. We are also deeply concerned that our veterans, who have already sacrificed so much for their country, do not have ready access to the records they need to receive the benefits they rightfully deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our views.

Sincerely,



Lee White  
Executive Director  
National Coalition for History