



# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## OFFICE *of* INSPECTOR GENERAL

Date: February 12, 2015

To: David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States

From: Office of Inspector General (OIG)

Subject: Audit Memorandum No. 15-08: NARA's Timeliness in Responding to Department of Veterans Affairs Record Requests

The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) provides records to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the performance of their official duties relating to the adjudication of claims and providing medical care to veterans. Recent publicity about the VA concerning patient wait times, scheduling practices, and alleged patient deaths<sup>1</sup> contributed to an increase in military personnel record (MPR) requests from the VA and veterans. As a result, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) performed this audit in conjunction with another NPRC audit.<sup>2</sup> The objective of this audit was to assess whether the NPRC was adequately fulfilling the VA requests in a timely manner. This audit memorandum focuses on the NPRC's response time to the increased requests for military records from the VA and veterans. It also discusses existing internal controls allowing veterans the capability to notify the NPRC promptly when a request is made for medical records.

### Response Times and Pending Requests

In order to determine whether the NPRC is responding in a timely manner to requests from the VA and veterans, we reviewed response times to requests and the NPRC's volume of pending requests. Based on our review, it appears the NPRC responded to requests from the VA in a timely manner. However, the additional requests due to the VA allegations, decreased funding requests from the service branches, inadequate staffing, and the NPRC's recently implemented Quality Assurance Program<sup>3</sup> hindered the facility's ability to process other requests timely. The NPRC's prompt response is critical to veterans who may need medical appointments or benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> *Veterans Health Administration: Review of Alleged Patient Deaths, Patient Wait Times, and Scheduling Practices at the Phoenix VA Health Care System* (VA Office of Inspector General Report No. 14-02603-267, issued August 26, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Audit of NARA's Processing of Military Interfiles and Refiles at the NPRC* (OIG Report No. 15-06, issued February 10, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The Quality Assurance Program is a daily review of 10% of the requests completed at the NPRC.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES *and*  
RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

8601 ADELPHI ROAD, ROOM 1300  
COLLEGE PARK, MD 20740-6001

[www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)

The volume of requests received by the NPRC has grown significantly. The average weekly receipts of new requests has increased by 14%, since May 2014. Currently, it takes the NPRC an average of 3.54 days to process VA requests. As of October 2014, the pending requests for all types of requestors grew to 158,487 (See Table 1) and only 29% (45,982) of them were assigned<sup>4</sup> to technicians for fulfillment, leaving the remaining 71% (112,505) unassigned.<sup>5</sup> The majority (53%) of the pending requests were over 30 days old (See Table 2), with the oldest pending requests dating back to February 2012.

Table 1: Pending Requests (as of October 2014)

	Unassigned	Assigned	Total <sup>6</sup>
Separation Document (DD-214 or equivalent)	2,231	11,385	13,616
VA Requests	8,107	111	8,218
Other	102,167	34,486	136,653
Total	112,505	45,982	158,487

Table 2: Aging of All Pending Requests (based on Received in Center date<sup>7</sup>)

	Unassigned	Assigned	Total
10 days or less	17,716	7,685	25,401
11-30 days	40,595	7,718	48,313
31-60 days	48,277	9,784	58,061
61-90 days	5,876	17,844	23,720
Greater than 90 days	41	2,951	2,992
Total	112,505	45,982	158,487

Generally, pending requests can be categorized into three categories: separation document requests (DD Form 214 or equivalent<sup>8</sup>), VA requests, and other requests.<sup>9</sup> We were unable to identify if any of the pending requests were from veterans seeking records for medical appointments or benefits.

<sup>4</sup> Assigned requests have been assigned to an NPRC Archives Technician for completion.

<sup>5</sup> Unassigned requests have not been assigned to an NPRC Archives Technician for completion.

<sup>6</sup> The pending totals listed for separation documents and VA requests are comparable to the number of requests completed on a weekly basis by the NPRC for these two categories.

<sup>7</sup> The Received in Center date is the date the NPRC mailroom enters information from the SF-180 form into the Case Management and Reporting System (CMRS), the database used to manage requests.

<sup>8</sup> A report of separation is issued when a service member is released or discharged from active duty. The report contains information normally needed to verify military service for benefits, retirement, employment and membership in veterans' organizations

<sup>9</sup> Requests categorized as other can include requests for medical records, all documents in Official Military Personnel File, or other records.

Based on discussions with management, additional resources were requested and approved for the NPRC. In September approximately 80 Archives Technicians were hired and additional Archives Technicians are expected to be hired over the next few months. All of these resources should allow the NPRC to significantly reduce the pending requests.

#### NARA's Notification of Medical Request Controls

We also reviewed controls in place to ensure veterans could notify the NPRC promptly if their request was for medical records. We determined the NPRC provides opportunities for veterans to indicate if the requests are for medical appointments or benefits. For example, when veterans submit a Standard Form 180 (SF-180<sup>10</sup>), they can voluntarily identify the purpose of the request including if it is for benefits, employment, VA loan programs, medical, genealogy, etc. However, the NPRC does not track this information, and providing this information does not guarantee faster service. Also, veterans with an urgent request (e.g. upcoming surgery, funeral, etc.) can submit an emergency request to the NPRC, which can be completed within two working days. The NPRC has made all of this information available on NARA's website for veterans. However, if a veteran goes to NARA's veteran's page and clicks on the link for "Need Immediate Assistance" they are directed to the NPRC's general customer service line, which does not offer any option for those needing immediate help with medical records.

#### **Recommendation 1**

The Executive for Agency Services should consider adding an additional level of complexity in the Case Management and Reporting System to allow technicians the ability to indicate if records requests are for medical records based on review of veterans' Standard Form 180 (SF-180).

#### Management Response

Management concurred with the recommendation.

#### **Recommendation 2**

The Executive for Agency Services should consider updating the NPRC's Customer Service line to include an option for veterans to communicate with a customer service representative regarding urgent medical requests (e.g. upcoming surgery).

#### Management Response

Management concurred with the recommendation.

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<sup>10</sup> Form used to request military records.

This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards between June and December 2014. These standards require we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

As with all OIG products, we will determine what information is publically posted on our website from this Memorandum. Should you or management have any redaction suggestions based on FOIA exemptions, please submit them to my counsel within one week from the date of this letter. Should we receive no response from you or management by this timeframe, we will interpret that as confirmation NARA does not desire any redactions to the posted report.

Should you have any questions concerning this report, or require additional information, please contact me at (301) 837-3000.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James Springs".

James Springs  
Acting Inspector General