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# Modernizing Access to Military Service Records: Frequently Asked Questions

August 8, 2022

**Congressional Research Service**

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47212



## Modernizing Access to Military Records: Frequently Asked Questions

As the world increasingly relies on digital access and electronic material as means to apply for jobs, educational programs, disability or military benefits, etc., documents that are not digitized are met with greater frustration by individuals trying to apply for various programs. One area that has received significant attention is the means of accessing military service records because only a small portion is currently digitized.

The process to access military service records can be challenging, due in part to the number of agencies and institutions involved in creating, retrieving, and maintaining military service information. Documents such as identifying information and specific claims forms may be within a veteran's possession, but accessing other documents may require contacting the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the Department of Defense (DOD), or the veteran's private doctor or medical facility. The main repository of military service records, outside of DOD, is in St. Louis, MO at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). The NPRC holds 4 million cubic feet of military and civil-service personnel-related records stored in several buildings, of which more than 2 million cubic feet are specifically military personnel and medical records for servicemembers who separated prior to or during 1994. Only 10% of these records are digitized, while the remainder are in paper form, making it more challenging for veterans and other federal agencies to access the records.

Digitization of materials may allow for the expedited consideration of veterans benefits, but concerns about the durability of digital formats and associated costs compared to paper records remain. As the federal government increasingly manages information in digital formats, efforts to modernize access to military service records have warranted congressional attention and oversight.

This report explains how records are created, how military service records are managed and stored, and the processes that surround digitizing and modernizing these records. In addition, this report responds to several questions frequently posed to CRS regarding funding for digitization and modernization efforts, along with challenges or obstacles that agencies may face while attempting to digitize their records.

**R47212**

August 8, 2022

**Heather M. Salazar**

Analyst in Veterans Policy

**Meghan M. Stuessy**

Analyst in Government  
Organization and  
Management

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## Introduction

Servicemembers, veterans, and their families frequently seek access to military service records for a variety of reasons: to ensure veterans receive their earned benefits and honors;<sup>1</sup> to complete family histories; among others. The process to access military service records can be challenging, due in part to the number of agencies and institutions involved in creating, retrieving, and maintaining military service information. As the federal government increasingly manages information in digital formats, efforts to modernize access to military service records have warranted congressional attention and oversight.

Documents such as identifying information and specific claims forms may be within a veteran's possession, but accessing other documents may require contacting the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA's) National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), the Department of Defense (DOD), or the veteran's private doctor or medical facility. Some Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs require additional or different documentation for a variety of reasons, but the following are always required:

- relevant identifying information, which could include a service number (SN) for certain groups of veterans, Social Security number (SSN), or marriage or birth certificates, etc.;
- the veteran's discharge or separation papers—Certificate of Uniformed Service (DD Form 214) or equivalent;
- an official military personnel file (OMPF), which typically includes dates and locations of service, and records of medical diagnosis treatment; and
- relevant VA application forms.

For all disability claims, the veteran is required to submit evidence of an injury/disease that happened during active duty service and potential medical evidence from private doctors or hospitals, in addition to the aforementioned items.<sup>2</sup> A veteran has the option to submit these documents electronically, through the U.S. Postal Service, in person at a VA regional office, through a veterans service organization, or with the help of a VA accredited representative.<sup>3</sup> If a veteran has all of the required information, he or she can submit a “fully developed claim” which is an electronic claim that VA can adjudicate quicker because the documentation does not require scanning and uploading. This type of claim also does not require VA to acquire additional

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<sup>1</sup> VA offers a wide variety of benefits for veterans and their families including but not limited to: disability compensation; disability pension; health care; readjustment counseling; burial benefits; and survivor pension. For more information on a variety of VA benefits, see CRS Report R44837, *Benefits for Service-Disabled Veterans*, coordinated by Heather M. Salazar; CRS Report R46813, *Department of Veterans Affairs: Burial Benefits and the National Cemetery Administration*, by Heather M. Salazar and Tamar B. Breslauer; CRS Report R46511, *Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA): Pension Programs*, by Heather M. Salazar; and CRS Report R42747, *Health Care for Veterans: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, by Sidath Viranga Panangala and Jared S. Sussman.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *Evidence Needed for Your Disability Claims*, March 22, 2022, at <https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/evidence-needed/>; and Department of Veterans Affairs, “How to Apply for VA Health Care,” March 9, 2022, at <https://www.va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply/>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on veterans service organizations and accredited representatives, see CRS Report R46412, *Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs): Frequently Asked Questions*, by Tamar B. Breslauer and Carol D. Davis; and CRS Report R46428, *Veterans Accredited Representatives: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Heather M. Salazar and Tamar B. Breslauer.

information. However, the adjudication process is longer if VA needs to assist the veteran in acquiring paper records or has to process a paper claim.<sup>4</sup>

Congress has taken an interest in modernizing the VA benefits claim process with more digital assets and has also taken an interest in overall records digitization efforts, chiefly overseen by NARA. Legislative efforts during the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress have included:

- H.R. 7153, “Department of Veterans Affairs Principles of Benefits Automation Act,” and
- H.R. 7256, “Expediting Temporary Ratings for Veterans Act.”

These legislative proposals would direct VA to modernize and improve the agency’s information technology mechanisms to increase the speed of processing claims, including digitizing and accessing records electronically. The legislative proposals regarding NARA are focused on the performance of the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), and include:

- H.R. 7337, “Access for Veterans to Records Act,” and
- H.R. 3710, “Reopening to address Every COmplete Record request for Devoted Servicemembers Act of 2021 (RECORDS Act of 2021).”

Digitization of materials may allow for the expedited consideration of veterans benefits, but concerns remain about the durability of digital formats and associated costs compared to paper records.<sup>5</sup> This report answers questions on how records are created, how military service records are managed and stored, and the processes that surround digitizing and modernizing these records. In addition, this report provides answers to several questions frequently posed to CRS regarding funding for digitization and modernization efforts along with challenges or obstacles that agencies may face while attempting to digitize their records.

## **1. What are military service records?**

When an individual joins the U.S. Armed Forces,<sup>6</sup> its Reserve components, or the National Guard, an “official military personnel file” (OMPF) is created, which records the activities of the servicemember throughout his or her career. The OMPF contains documentation pertaining to the servicemember’s training, education, tour of duty dates and locations, performance, awards, and decoration. It also includes records of injuries incurred, and the circumstance of the member’s separation from military service. The OMPF is created by the service branch in which the servicemember serves and becomes a crucial record to accessing benefits upon separation.

Upon a servicemember’s separation from service, the individual is issued a Certificate of Uniformed Service, most often referred to as DD Form 214. This form is provided to servicemembers who completed active duty or at least 90 days of consecutive days of active duty for training. The DD Form 214 will provide information on when and where the individual entered and left the service, last duty assignment and rank, their job specialty, awards or citations received, and character of service at separation.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on VA’s claims process, see CRS Report R47163, *Department of Veterans Affairs: Claims Process and Compensation and Pension Exams by Contracted Physicians*, coordinated by Heather M. Salazar.

<sup>5</sup> For an exploration of some of these challenges surrounding digital and print formats, see CRS Report R45014, *Government Printing, Publications, and Digital Information Management: Issues and Challenges*, by R. Eric Petersen.

<sup>6</sup> 10 U.S.C. §101(a)(4). The U.S. Armed Forces includes the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and Space Force.

In February 2022, the Department of Defense (DOD) released new instructions on the issuance of DD Form 214-1. This form is an addendum to the regularly issued DD Form 214, and will be provided for all members of the National Guard and Reserve Components upon separation, whether or not the individual completes a period of active duty or active duty for training. The DD Form 214-1 would list all of the individual's Guard/Reserve service—active duty or not—and will be provided in conjunction with the DD Form 214; however, only the relevant portions of the DD Form 214 will be completed. If a National Guard or Reserve member did not serve on active duty, the DD Form 214 will only include identifying information related to the service branch and individual. If the Guardsmen or Reservist had active duty service, that would be listed on the initial DD Form 214, with any additional Guard/Reserve duty listed on DD Form 214-1.<sup>7</sup>

In cases, where a veteran's DD Form 214 is missing, has been destroyed, or cannot be provided to the veteran, a "Statement of Service" is issued in lieu of the DD Form 214.<sup>8</sup> This document is generally created to assist veterans with qualifying for VA benefits. The veteran should contact the service branch for information on this statement or request VA to assist in acquiring such a statement through its obligation of "duty to assist" (see question 2).

DOD is in the process of creating electronic discharge papers, pursuant to Section 569 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2020 (P.L. 116-92). More information on this effort is found in Question 8. What efforts are being made to digitize military service records?"

## 2. How do agencies collect and manage military service records?

When a veteran or survivor files a claim for VA benefits—under Title 38, Section 5103A, of the *U.S. Code* and Title 38, Section 3.159, of the *Code of Federal Regulations*—VA has a "duty to assist" in developing or completing a claim, which initiates the federal government's effort to collect and manage an individual's military service records. This obligation requires VA to notify the claimant of additional evidence that was not previously submitted but is required to process the claim. In addition, under VA's "duty to assist" obligation, it can assist in accessing records from nonfederal and federal entities. VA can contact DOD to request a veteran's OMPF, including medical and separation documentation, and NPRC for an older veteran whose records and DD Form 214 have been sent to NPRC for archival purposes.

Another way in which agencies work together to collect and manage military service records is through joint records centers. Beginning in 1989, the U.S. Army's Joint Services Record Research Center (JSRRC) mission researched Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard records that contained historical information on the branches' individual units, as well as some personnel records, to support requests from VA for veterans' claims. In 2019, an Army reorganization led JSRRC to begin to transfer responsibility for certain records research to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).<sup>9</sup> As a result, VBA created a Records Research Center

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<sup>7</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Department of Defense, *DoD Instruction 1336.01: Certificate of Uniformed Service (DD Form 214/5 Series)*, February 17, 2022, at <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/133601p.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Approximately 16-18 million OMPFs were destroyed in a fire at the NPRC on July 12, 1973. It is estimated that 80% of records for Army personnel discharged between November 1, 1912 and January 1, 1960, and 75% of records for Air Force personnel discharged between September 25, 1947 and January 1, 1964, were destroyed. For more information about materials affected by the 1973 NPRC fire, see National Archives and Records Administration, *The 1973 Fire, National Personnel Records Center*, at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/fire-1973>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY2021 Budget Submission, Benefits and Burial Programs and Departmental Administration*, vol. 3 of 4, February 2020, p. VBA-186.

(RRC) to take on JSRRC's mission. VA published a final rule in the *Federal Register* on March 23, 2021, amending its regulations addressing the change in agencies.<sup>10</sup>

VA's FY2021 budget submission explained the change in records research, stating that RRC planned to use contract support and 13 full-time employees to transition these records research services from JSRRC to VBA.<sup>11</sup>

VA's FY2022 budget submission explained that the Army's new Office for Unit Records Response will conduct research for the VBA on Agent Orange and post-traumatic stress disorder claims for incidents that occurred less than 30 years ago. This includes locations where DOD conducts environmental and soil tests to determine traces of Agent Orange or other tactical herbicides. In December 2019, DOD updated the list of locations that VA uses to grant benefits for Agent Orange exposure due to newly discovered evidence and environmental testing that supported use, storage, or testing of the herbicides.

VBA's RRC will conduct the research for claims where the incident occurred more than 30 years ago. The budget submission also included information about VA creating a digital repository for these claims.

Compensation Service developed and deployed a workflow engine tool within the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) that provides a fully searchable digital image repository. This stores the digitized records and tracks current tasks. Compensation Service is targeting a full operational capability by the end of 2021. The VA-Army IT interface is critical for the RRC and the Department of the Army to process these claims. Compensation Service plans to implement a scanning solution for daily research and add Coast Guard records.<sup>12</sup>

According to VA's FY2023 budget submission, the fully searchable digital repository did not launch at the end of the calendar year 2021 as predicted. It is targeted for full operational capability by the end of 2022, according to the budget submission. VBA said it also plans to include a scanning solution for Coast Guard records that are used in completion of research requests. VBA reported that it completed more than 41,000 research requests in 2021 and is averaging approximately 200 requests per day. VBA estimated that with the increased requests, the cost of research will be approximately \$6.4 million in 2023 and is included in the overall appropriation requests for VBA's Office of Field Operations and Office of Business Integration.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Where are military service records located?

DOD, VA, and NPRC may hold relevant records for servicemembers and veterans, and the age of the record determines where the record is stored. The transfer of records between agencies and storage locations can have implications for locating materials needed to process veterans' benefits requests.<sup>14</sup> The age of the servicemember's records is calculated from the date of separation from the military.

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<sup>10</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, "New Evidence," 86 *Federal Register* 15413-15414, March 23, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY2021 Budget Submission, Benefits and Burial Programs and Departmental Administration*, vol. 3 of 4, February 2020, p. VBA-186.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY2022 Budget Submission, Benefits and Burial Programs and Departmental Administration*, vol. 3 of 4, May 2021, p. VBA-173.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY2023 Budget Submission, Burial and Benefits Programs and Departmental Administration*, vol. 3 of 4, March 2022, p. VBA-80.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Congress, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial

Generally, the records of servicemembers who separated from the military less than 62 years ago are under the purview of the DOD or VA. NARA takes custody of, or *accessions*, records of servicemembers who separated from the military more than 62 years ago via NPRC. The NPRC is the central repository for the federal government's military and civil service personnel-related records. The NPRC stores these documents permanently in accordance with the Federal Records Act (44 U.S.C. Chapters 21, 29, 31, and 33).<sup>15</sup> NARA provides information on records not available at NPRC and where they are otherwise located on their website.<sup>16</sup>

Records control schedules also provide information on the location of records prior to their transfer to NARA. A records control schedule includes information such as a title of the records series that is descriptive in a meaningful way for agency personnel, a complete description of their agency use, physical type as appropriate, how the records are arranged, and disposition instructions.<sup>17</sup>

For additional information on locating sources related to military unit histories and awards, see CRS Report RS21282, *Military Service Records, Awards, and Unit Histories: A Guide to Locating Sources*, by Barbara Salazar Torreon and Travis A. Ferrell.

#### 4. How are military service records formatted and stored?

The formatting and storage of military service records varies widely based on when the information was created. While recently created records are increasingly managed digitally, many older records, including those at the NPRC, remain in physical formats. The NPRC houses 2 million boxes of military and medical records in 15 warehouses. Of those holdings, only 10% are available in electronic formats, while the rest are available in paper and other physical formats.<sup>18</sup>

The NPRC holds 4 million cubic feet of military and civil-service personnel-related records stored in several buildings, of which more than 2 million cubic feet are military personnel and medical records for servicemembers who separated prior to or during 1994.<sup>19</sup> Generally, records for servicemembers who separated after 1994 are available in electronic formats and are available through the servicemembers' branch of service.<sup>20</sup>

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Affairs, *Wading Through Warehouses of Paper: The Challenges of Transitioning Veterans Records to Paperless Technology*, 112<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., December 4, 2012, H.Hrg 112-82 (Washington: GPO, 2013), pp. 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the treatment of records under the Federal Records Act, see CRS In Focus IF11119, *Federal Records: Types and Treatments*, by Meghan M. Stuessy.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center: Records Not at NPRC*, July 13, 2021, at <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/frequently-requested-records>. See also National Archives and Records Administration, *Locations of Service Records*, at <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/locations>.

<sup>17</sup> 36 C.F.R. §1225.14 and 36 C.F.R. §1225.16. For more information about the treatment of federal records materials, see CRS In Focus IF11119, *Federal Records: Types and Treatments*, by Meghan M. Stuessy.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Rob Portman, Senator, and Sherrod Brown, Senator, to President Joseph R. Biden and Hon. David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States, April 14, 2021, at [https://www.portman.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/%5BUntitled%5D%20%283%29\\_0.pdf](https://www.portman.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/%5BUntitled%5D%20%283%29_0.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *The National Personnel Records Center - A History*, at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/history>; and National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center Prepares for Expansion of Onsite Workforce*, Washington, DC, March 8, 2021, at <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2021/nr21-30>.

<sup>20</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *Access to Military Service and Pension Records*, May 20, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/research/order/research/order/order-vets-records>.



## Figure I. Then and Now: Records Sent to NARA

1936 and 2021



**Source:** National Archives and Records Administration, *Photograph of Veteran's Bureau Records in Stack Areas, 6/12/1936*, National Archives Catalog, Record Group 64, Series: Historic Photograph File of National Archives Events and Personnel, 1935 - 1975, June 12, 1936, at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7820633>. U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations, *Largest OSI caseload sent to National Archives*, Quantico, VA, December 20, 2021, at <https://www.osi.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2879835/largest-osi-caseload-sent-to-national-archives/>.

Complicating efforts to digitize tangible materials while also managing digital files, the volume of digital records materials has increased exponentially in comparison to tangible records.<sup>21</sup> “Huge volumes of electronic information” are a “major challenge” in record management, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and “electronic information is

<sup>21</sup> Because NARA accepts historical materials from agencies for preservation, the volume of analog materials to be processed has not slowed, even as agencies adopt electronic formats. Under its current strategic plan, NARA notes that it still receives about 100,000 cubic feet per year of new archival records in analog formats. Similarly, the volume of new electronic records transferred varies significantly from year-to-year, but remains substantial. NARA plans that it will digitize 500 million pages of records and make them available online to the public by FY2024. For more information on NARA’s current strategic plan, see National Archives and Records Administration, *2018-2022 Strategic Plan*, February 2018, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/2018/strategic-plan-2018-2022.pdf>.

increasingly being created in volumes that pose a significant technical challenge to our ability to organize it and make it accessible.”<sup>22</sup>

In December 2020, the Archivist of the United States wrote to Congress that in a typical year NPRC responds to 1.2 million records requests, most of which were completed within 10 days.<sup>23</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, NPRC reported that it could respond to about 6,300 requests from VA per week. However, due to complications from the pandemic, such as facility closures, delayed reopenings, and reduced staffing, NPRC said it responded to an average of 2,500 VA requests per week during the winter between 2020 and 2021.<sup>24</sup>

With specific regard to managing military service records requests, NARA stated that staff responded to more than 7,000 emergency reference requests during the closure and delayed reopening period.<sup>25</sup> However, in its FY2023 congressional budget justification, NARA reported:

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt operations at NARA’s Federal Records Centers throughout FY 2021 causing NARA to fall well below its target in meeting customers’ requests. Substantial backlogs of unanswered users requests accumulated as a significant number of staff were unable to work onsite at their local facility due to facility closures. Emergency requests were given priority and serviced although backlogs of veterans and agency requests amassed.<sup>26</sup>

NARA’s ability to keep pace with the processing of records requests depends not only on the volume of records, but also on the adequacy of staff training and records maintenance. NARA also describes that the pandemic has delayed the transfer of records from agencies to the NPRC, and that the agency is working to develop capacity to service requests remotely.

## 5. Who can request documents?

Federal agencies may request documents from other federal entities. VA’s “duty to assist” obligation can apply to accessing records from either federal or nonfederal 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. In some circumstances, VA is able to acquire a veteran’s medical records through the electronic health system that is a joint DOD-VA system. In other cases, where the records have not been digitized, VA can contact the service branches or NPRC for a veteran’s records. The veteran’s name, service branch, date of service, and either service number or SSN is needed.

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<sup>22</sup> GAO noted that it did not independently verify these reported volumes of records. See GAO, *Information Management: The Challenges of Managing Electronic Records*, GAO-10-838T, June 17, 2010, at <http://gao.gov/assets/130/124883.pdf>, pp. 10-11.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States, to Carolyn B. Maloney, Chairwoman, December 2020, at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/NARA.201209.Letter%20re%20NPRC.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center Prepares for Expansion of Onsite Workforce*, Washington, DC, March 8, 2021, at <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2021/nr21-30>. See also Nicole Ogrysko, “Pandemic-induced backlog sparks new efforts to digitize military records at NARA,” *Federal News Network*, June 7, 2021, at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2021/06/pandemic-induced-backlog-sparks-new-efforts-to-digitize-military-records-at-nara/>. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF11950, *COVID-19 Impact on Access to Military Service Records*, by Heather M. Salazar and Meghan M. Stuessy.

<sup>25</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *FY2022 Congressional Justification*, May 28, 2021, p. 76, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/performance-budget/2022performance-budget.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *FY2023 Congressional Justification*, March 28, 2022, p. APP-6, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/performance-budget/2023-nara-congressional-justification.pdf>.

Servicemembers, veterans, next of kin (NOK), and VA are also able to request information from DOD and NPRC. If the servicemember's discharge date is less than 62 years ago, the veteran may be eligible to request their personnel and medical records directly from the Army,<sup>27</sup> Navy,<sup>28</sup> Marine Corps,<sup>29</sup> Air Force,<sup>30</sup> Coast Guard,<sup>31</sup> or Space Force.<sup>32</sup>

Requests for a living servicemember's records must be accompanied by the signature of the servicemember, court appointment documentation, authorization letter, or proof of power of attorney in order for documents to be released to the servicemember, NOK, or authorized representative.

For deceased servicemembers who separated less than 62 years ago, NOK may request military service records from the service branch by providing proof of the servicemember's death.

Both NPRC and VA consider a veteran's NOK to include a surviving spouse who has not remarried, parents, children, or siblings. VA details four ways in which the veteran's NOK can request the military records: (1) mail or fax form SF-180; (2) write a letter to NPRC; (3) visit NPRC in person; or (4) contact the state or county veterans agency.<sup>33</sup> A request for a veteran's record by a NOK must contain: the veteran's full name; service branch; date of service; either service number or SSN; and date and place of birth. If the NOK suspects that the deceased veteran's records were destroyed, NPRC requests the NOK also provide the veteran's place of discharge; last assigned unit; and place of entry into service, if known.<sup>34</sup>

For deceased servicemembers who separated more than 62 years ago, these archival records may be requested through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA; 5 U.S.C. §552).<sup>35</sup> Any member of the public may make a FOIA request. DOD, VA, and NARA all must comply with information requests through FOIA subject to certain exclusions, and oftentimes proactively disclose certain

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<sup>27</sup> Army Soldier Record Branch, *Accessing or Requesting Your Official Military Personnel File Documents*, May 10, 2022, at <https://www.hrc.army.mil/content/Accessing%20or%20Requesting%20Your%20Official%20Military%20Personnel%20File%20Documents>.

<sup>28</sup> Navy Personnel Command, *Ordering & Reviewing Your OMPF*, at <https://www.mynavyhr.navy.mil/Career-Management/Records-Management/Military-Personnel-Records/Order-Review-OMPF/>.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Marines, *Official Military Personnel Files*, at <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Agencies/Office-of-Legislative-Affairs/Congressional-Correspondence-Section/Records-Request/>.

<sup>30</sup> Air Force Personnel Center, *Request Copy of Military Records*, at <https://www.afpc.af.mil/Career-Management/Military-Personnel-Records/>.

<sup>31</sup> Personnel Service Center USGC Military Records Section, *Obtaining a Copy of Your Personnel Data Record (PDR)*, at [https://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Human-Resources-CG-1/Personnel-Service-Center-PSC/BOPS/PSC-BOPS-C/PSC-BOP-S-C-MR/PSC-BOPS-C-MR\\_PDR/](https://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Human-Resources-CG-1/Personnel-Service-Center-PSC/BOPS/PSC-BOPS-C/PSC-BOP-S-C-MR/PSC-BOPS-C-MR_PDR/).

<sup>32</sup> The Space Force is a separate branch of the U.S. military that is organized within the Department of the Air Force. Currently, many of the policies and requirements are the same as the Air Force due to the recent creation of the force.

<sup>33</sup> Form SF-180 provides an instruction and information sheet that explains the procedures required to request and release military service records in detail. See National Archives and Records Administration, *Standard Form 180—Requests Pertaining to Military Records*, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/order/standard-form-180.pdf>. See also Department of Veterans Affairs, "How Do I Request Someone Else's Military Records," *Request Your Military Service Records (including DD214)*, March 22, 2022, at <https://www.va.gov/records/get-military-service-records/>.

<sup>34</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center: Request Military Service Records*, April 22, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records>.

<sup>35</sup> For more information on how to make a request under FOIA, see U.S. Department of Justice, *How do I make a FOIA Request?* at <https://www.foia.gov/how-to.html>. For more information about FOIA, see CRS Report R46238, *The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA): A Legal Overview*, by Daniel J. Sheffner.

commonly requested agency records through their FOIA libraries.<sup>36</sup> Certain information provided in response to a FOIA request may be redacted, per one of FOIA's nine exemptions.

## Restrictions on Disclosure

Certain statutes govern the release of government and personal information once requested. These statutory requirements can impact the completeness of information received in response to a request, and whether individuals can make an appropriate request for documents.

Information provided in response to a records request may be redacted under FOIA or the Privacy Act of 1974 and therefore may appear incomplete. While FOIA's main purpose is to inform the public of the federal government's operations, the act excludes certain private and governmental interests from disclosure. FOIA lists nine exemptions from its disclosure requirements that permit, but do not require, agencies to withhold information or records that are otherwise subject to release. These include reasons related to national defense or foreign policy, matters exempted from disclosure under other statutes, and personnel, medical, and similar files.<sup>37</sup>

Like other individually identifiable information the federal government maintains, disclosure of military service records is restricted by the Privacy Act of 1974. The Privacy Act of 1974 pertains to living U.S. citizens and permanent residents, and generally prohibits disclosure of individually identifiable information without the individual's written consent.<sup>38</sup> The act allows an individual to request an agency perform a search for information in a system of records based on identifiers such as the individual's own name or SSN. Courts and the Department of Justice have interpreted the Privacy Act's definition of *individual* to exclude deceased individuals.<sup>39</sup> To comply with the Privacy Act, the agency solicits written consent of the servicemember via completion of form SF-180 or other permissible documentation, depending on the nature of the requester's relationship to the servicemember.

## 6. Are fees charged to reproduce military service records?

Fees to reproduce military service records generally depend on where the information is located, and the policies of the agencies holding the information.<sup>40</sup> Records of individuals who separated from the military less than 62 years ago are under the purview of DOD, while those exceeding 62 years are managed by NARA.

Sections 1041 and 1042 of Title 10 of the *U.S. Code* prohibit DOD fees for providing certificates of service or discharge under certain conditions. Therefore, for records less than 62 years old under DOD's purview, there is generally no charge for basic military personnel and medical record information provided to veterans, NOK, and authorized representatives.

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<sup>36</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, *Search Government Websites*, at <https://www.foia.gov/search.html>.

<sup>37</sup> See CRS In Focus IF11450, *The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA): An Introduction*, by Daniel J. Sheffner.

<sup>38</sup> Exceptions to the written consent requirement of the Privacy Act can be located at 5 U.S.C. §552a(b). For more information on recent legislation to modernize the Privacy Act's written consent requirement to permit electronic authorizations, see CRS In Focus IF12159, *The CASES Act: Implementation and Issues for Congress*, by Meghan M. Stuessy and R. Eric Petersen.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, *Overview of the Privacy Act of 1974*, 2020, p. 24, at <https://www.justice.gov/opcl/overview-privacy-act-1974-2020-edition>.

<sup>40</sup> Under 5 U.S.C. §522(a)(f)(5) of the Privacy Act, an agency may only assess fees for reproduction in response to an individual's request for information about him or herself.

For records more than 62 years old, NARA assesses reproduction fees as it would for any types of archival records under Title 44, Sections 2116 and 2307, of the *U.S. Code*. Archival records are open to the public and subject to NARA's public fee schedule.<sup>41</sup> NARA notes that a typical OMPF copy of more than 6 pages would be subject to a \$70 flat fee; however, there is no fee to review an archival record in person at the St. Louis Archival Research Room.<sup>42</sup>

Some companies request servicemembers' written consent to retrieve military service records, including DD Form 214s, and later charge recipients for this service. However, many of these records can be requested by servicemembers and produced at no cost to the requester. The VA warns against using these companies for document retrieval, writing:

unscrupulous businesses continue to charge them fees to obtain copies of their (free) military service and discharge records. Some websites charge \$90 to \$150 to obtain copies of DD-214s and other free military records through their "expedited" service, but Veterans Affairs agencies in most states often can provide the requested paperwork within a day or within hours for military funeral honors. All states have benefits counselors where Veterans can receive free assistance.

Veterans who encounter companies charging fees for their discharge records or other military paperwork are encouraged to report it to their state's Veterans Affairs agency.<sup>43</sup>

These companies have also recently come under congressional scrutiny. On July 15, 2022, the House Committee on Oversight and Reform announced that they are investigating whether these companies "are misusing National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) procedures intended to expedite emergency records requests while charging veterans to obtain government records they are entitled to receive at no cost."<sup>44</sup>

## 7. How quickly are NPRC records requests processed?

NARA stated in March 2021 that in a typical year, NPRC "responds to more than 1.2 million requests for copies of [military personnel and medical] records, or more than 20,000 requests each week, most of which are completed in under 10 days."<sup>45</sup> Additionally, NPRC reported in June 2021 that it could respond to about 6,300 requests from VA per week.<sup>46</sup> For requests from individuals, NPRC provides a web portal and telephone number to check the status of a records

<sup>41</sup> 44 U.S.C. §2116(c) and 44 U.S.C. §2307.

<sup>42</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center: Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF) and Archival Records Requests*, January 24, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/military-personnel/ompf-archival-requests#fees>.

<sup>43</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *Veterans: Be wary of scams regarding job offers and the sale of military records, government forms*, VAntage Point, April 17, 2018, at <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/47492/veterans-be-wary-of-scams-regarding-job-offers-and-the-sale-of-military-records-government-forms/>.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, Chairwoman of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, and Representative Stephen F. Lynch, Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security, to Mr. Cody Graham, July 15, 2022, at <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2022-07-15.CBM%20SFL%20to%20Graham-Angels%20Research%20re%20Emergency%20Records%20Request.pdf>. See also Amelia Brust, "Congress investigating whether companies are profiting off veterans disability claims backlog," *Federal News Network*, July 15, 2022, at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2022/07/congress-investigating-whether-companies-are-profiting-off-veterans-disability-claims-backlog/slide/1/>.

<sup>45</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, "National Personnel Records Center Prepares for Expansion of Onsite Workforce," press release, March 8, 2021, at <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2021/nr21-30>.

<sup>46</sup> Nicole Ogrysko, "Pandemic-Induced Backlog Sparks New Efforts to Digitize Military Records at NARA," *Federal News Network*, June 7, 2021, at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2021/06/pandemic-induced-backlog-sparks-new-efforts-to-digitize-military-records-at-nara/>.

request and suggests that requesters allow 10 days for the receipt and initial processing of the request.<sup>47</sup>

NARA states that improvements are underway “to expand remote processing opportunities and increase capacity for digitization in the stacks in order to enhance operations in a socially-distanced, post-COVID-19 environment.”<sup>48</sup>

In NARA’s five-year strategic plan, the agency set forward a goal that by FY2026, it would provide 95% of customer requests in the promised time. Per the strategic plan, this figure would represent the “weighted average of NARA’s average response time when: furnishing items in public research rooms, responding to reference requests by email and mail, providing veterans and their families with copies of military separation documents (DD-214), and responding to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests from the public.”<sup>49</sup> While NARA reports that it has responded to 93% of customer requests within the promised time since 2017, NARA missed its target in 2020 by reportedly delivering 89.2% of requested records within the promised time.<sup>50</sup> Data for 2021 and 2022 are not yet available. These figures do not account for possible fluctuations in the request fulfillment times offered to requesters, and therefore may not reconcile with reported backlog numbers.

## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Processing

In March 2020, NPRC closed due to COVID-19, keeping minimal staff on site to complete emergency requests.<sup>51</sup> The NPRC resumed normal operations on March 7, 2022.<sup>52</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NPRC staff prioritized emergency requests.<sup>53</sup> Emergency requests are considered to be those involving burial honors for deceased veterans, life-threatening medical emergencies, homeless shelters seeking to gain admittance of homeless veterans, and comparable emergencies. Requests for records were not processed as expeditiously as before the pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, the NPRC reportedly processed 2,500 requests from VA per week, down from their reported 20,000 requests per week in a typical year.<sup>54</sup> As of March 31,

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<sup>47</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center: Check Status of a Request for Military Service Records*, July 1, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/forms>.

<sup>48</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *FY2022 Congressional Justification*, May 28, 2021, p. APP-6, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/performance-budget/2022performance-budget.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *FY2022-2026 Strategic Plan*, March 2022, p. 7, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/nara-2022-2026-strategic-plan-march-2022.pdf/>.

<sup>50</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *FY2023 Congressional Justification*, March 28, 2022, p. APP-6, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/performance-budget/2023-nara-congressional-justification.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> The number of staff available at the NPRC has varied throughout the pandemic. In October 2020, staff began to return to in-person work to process more requests, but on November 7, 2020, NPRC again closed due to a spike in COVID cases among staff. Following a gradual restoration of on-site staff, during the spring and summer of 2021, NPRC increased on-site staffing levels to 45% of its workforce, effective October 18, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> See banner announcement at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/military-personnel#:~:text=Louis%20area%20have%20improved%20and,.gov%2Fst%2Dlouis.> “Resumption of Onsite Operations at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis: Local health conditions in the St. Louis area have improved and the NPRC resumed normal operations on March 7, 2022. While the National Personnel Records Center has reopened for normal operations, the federal record center research room remains closed. The operating status of the public research room may be found at <http://www.archives.gov/st-louis>.”

<sup>53</sup> NARA notes that emergency requests may be submitted via the online eVetRecs portal, accessible at <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/emergencies>.

<sup>54</sup> Nicole Ogrysko, “Pandemic-Induced Backlog Sparks New Efforts to Digitize Military Records at NARA,” *Federal News Network*, June 7, 2021, at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2021/06/pandemic-induced-backlog->

2022, NARA's Office of Inspector General states that the NPRC's backlog of requests exceeded 500,000 requests.<sup>55</sup> According to *The Federal News Network* June 7, 2021 report, the NPRC anticipates that it may take 18-to-24 months to resolve the backlog.<sup>56</sup>

Complicating the efforts to reduce the backlog of records requests is that the majority of records requested from NPRC are in paper form. As of June 2021, only 10% of these records were available in digital formats, meaning the vast majority of materials at the NPRC only exist in paper form and cannot be accessed remotely.<sup>57</sup> As a result, staff must physically retrieve materials on-site and may not be able to maintain social distancing.

## 8. What efforts are being made to digitize military service records?

Government-wide efforts to digitize paper records to increase remote accessibility are ongoing and predate the pandemic.<sup>58</sup> In 2019, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and NARA announced an initiative to convert federal recordkeeping practices from analog to digital. The corresponding guidance, OMB Memorandum M-19-21, provided seven targets for all federal agencies to meet in order to comply. Two of them have December 31, 2022, deadlines:<sup>59</sup>

**1.2** By 2022, Federal agencies will manage all permanent records in an electronic format and with appropriate metadata; and

**1.3** By 2022, Federal agencies will manage all temporary records in an electronic format or store them in commercial records storage facilities.

NARA annually solicits reports from the Senior Agency Officials for Records Management (SAORMs) on policy successes and challenges related to records program implementation. SAORMs are agency officials tasked with ensuring that their agencies efficiently and appropriately comply with all applicable statutes and policies related to records management.<sup>60</sup> The 2021 report asked SAORMs to report on various aspects of M-19-21 implementation. DOD<sup>61</sup> and VA<sup>62</sup> SAORMs reported that they would not meet targets 1.2 and 1.3 by the end of 2022, but

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<sup>55</sup> Brett M. Baker, *Semiannual Report to Congress: October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022*, National Archives Office of Inspector General, Washington DC, March 31, 2022, p. 12, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/oig/nara-oig-sar22a-1oct21-to-31mar22.pdf#page=12>.

<sup>56</sup> Nicole Ogrysko, "Pandemic-Induced Backlog Sparks New Efforts to Digitize Military Records at NARA," *Federal News Network*, June 7, 2021, at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2021/06/pandemic-induced-backlog-sparks-new-efforts-to-digitize-military-records-at-nara/>.

<sup>57</sup> Nicole Ogrysko, "Pandemic-induced backlog sparks new efforts to digitize military records at NARA," *Federal News Network*, June 7, 2021 at <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2021/06/pandemic-induced-backlog-sparks-new-efforts-to-digitize-military-records-at-nara/>. The NPRC resumed normal operations on March 7, 2022. For more information, see National Archives and Records Administration, *Onsite Operations at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis*, at <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/operating-status>.

<sup>58</sup> Federal Records Management Council, *FRMC White Paper: Digitization Cost Benefit Analysis*, National Archives and Records Administration, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/frmc-digitization-cost-benefit-whitepaper.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Russel T. Vought and David S. Ferriero, *M-19-21: Transition to Electronic Records*, White House Office of Management and Budget, June 28, 2019, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/policy/m-19-21-transition-to-federal-records.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> Chief Information Officers Council, *Key Stakeholders: 4.16 Senior Agency Official for Records Management (SAORM)*, at <https://www.cio.gov/handbook/key-stakeholders/saorm/>.

<sup>61</sup> Christine Condon, *Senior Agency Official for Records Management: 2021 Annual Report*, Department of Defense, Washington DC, March 30, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/agency/dod-saorm-2021.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Kurt DelBene, *Senior Agency Official for Records Management: 2021 Annual Report*, Department of Veterans

that they have planned for temporary records storage in commercial records storage facilities. Additionally, both agencies plan to request exceptions to the M-19-21 requirements before the December deadline.<sup>63</sup> NARA's SAORM responded yes to both targets.<sup>64</sup>

VA and DOD have also made efforts to digitize their records at the agency level.<sup>65</sup> A recent digitization effort undertaken by VA and NARA was in response to the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-23), which expanded VA presumptive service connected benefits for those exposed to Agent Orange. VA and NARA entered into an agreement in August 2019 to digitize the deck logs of U.S. military vessels that served during the Vietnam War within the geographic locations specified in law. The project took approximately one year to complete, with the final logs entered in VA's specially created ship locator tool in September 2020.<sup>66</sup> The project digitized approximately 29 million images from 1,800 vessels' deck logs and has helped over 25,000 Vietnam veterans receive VA benefits.<sup>67</sup>

Through this effort, many Vietnam-era veterans (or their families if those veterans have died) are able to resubmit information if their VA benefits were previously denied due to not having eligible "in country" service. VA claims processors are now able to enter the dates of service and the ship names into the ship locator tool, and it will determine whether those ships were within the boundaries set forth in P.L. 116-23.

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 forward, into a system that is designed to share data with VA.<sup>68</sup> Some records prior to 2014 have also been scanned, including some records that were not retired and sent to NPRC.

Congress has enacted legislation mandating digitization of the DD Form 214. Section 569 of the FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92) requires that DOD provide separated servicemembers with a machine-readable and electronically transferable DD Form 214 beginning December 31, 2023.<sup>69</sup>

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Affairs, Washington DC, March 11, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/agency/va-saorm-2021.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> For more information about the exception process, see <https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2020/2020-01>.

<sup>64</sup> William J. Bosanko, *Senior Agency Official for Records Management: 2021 Annual Report*, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, March 11, 2022, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/agency/nara-saorm-2021.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> Department of Defense Instruction (DODI) 5015.02, *DOD Records Management Program*, August 17, 2017, at <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/501502p.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Brandi Vincent, "VA, NARA Complete Digitization Effort to Help Speed Up Disability Claims for Some Veterans," *Nextgov*, September 29, 2020, at <https://www.nextgov.com/it-modernization/2020/09/va-nara-complete-digitization-effort-help-speed-disability-claims-some-veterans/168869/>.

<sup>67</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, Letter of Agreement Between Department of Veterans Affairs: Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), August 9, 2019, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/digitization/pdf/va-letterofagreement-final-signed.pdf>. <https://www.archives.gov/files/digitization/pdf/va-letterofagreement-final-signed.pdf>.

<sup>68</sup> Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Interoperability of the Department of Defense (DoD) Health Artifact and Image Management Solution (HAIMS) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS)*, June 23, 2014, at <https://www.health.mil/Reference-Center/Reports/2014/06/23/Electronic-Health-Records-of-the-DoD-and-VA-HAIMS>.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Fahs, Congressional Requirements to Digitize Military Service Records Support Progress toward Improving Classification and Declassification, National Archives and Records Administration, Information Security Oversight Office, April 9, 2020, at <https://isoo-overview.blogs.archives.gov/2020/04/09/congressional-requirements-to-digitize->



## 9. What are the challenges to digitizing military service records?

In addition to the increasing volume of records and initial costs associated with digitizing analog records (such as hardware, software, and program staffing), challenges include the ongoing costs involved in maintaining access and usability of the converted materials, including records management considerations in developing or updating agency information technology (IT) systems, and changing identifiers for a series of records.<sup>70</sup>

### Ongoing Maintenance and Training Costs

In its guidance on maintaining electronic materials, NARA urges agencies to plan for these ongoing costs for the entire retention period of the records, observing that agencies will incur repeating costs.<sup>71</sup> Specifically, Title 36, Section 1236.12 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* requires,

As part of the capital planning and systems development life cycle processes, agencies must ensure: (a) That records management controls ... are planned and implemented in the system; (b) That all records in the system will be retrievable and usable for as long as needed to conduct agency business (i.e., for their NARA-approved retention period). Where the records will need to be retained beyond the planned life of the system, agencies must plan and budget for the migration of records and their associated metadata to new storage media or formats in order to avoid loss due to media decay or technology obsolescence.

With respect to images to be retained indefinitely, NARA requires the records systems be periodically inspected for file stability, documentation quality, and finding aid reliability.<sup>72</sup> These periodic inspections and maintenance requirements indicate the need for resource management and planning beyond the initial digital conversion of materials.

### Incorporating Records Management Consideration in IT Systems Planning

NARA and VA's Office of Inspector General have recommended increased attention to VA's management of staff and department-wide records management training. In its most recent 2016 inspection of VA's records management program, NARA notes that VA had not included records management processes as a stakeholder consideration in developing IT systems.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the 2016 inspection also found that records management training was not compliant with Title 36 of the *Code of Federal Regulations*, and that existing records management policies at VA were inadequate and not properly disseminated.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The challenges surrounding the volume of records is further discussed in "4. How are military service records formatted and stored?"

<sup>71</sup> 36 C.F.R. §1236.14. For more information on the process to schedule records as appropriate for temporary or permanent preservation periods, see CRS In Focus IF11119, *Federal Records: Types and Treatments*, by Meghan M. Stuessy.

<sup>72</sup> 36 C.F.R. §1237.28.

<sup>73</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *Department of Veterans Affairs Records Management Program: Records Management Inspection Report*, Washington, DC, October 7, 2016, p. 22, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/pdf/va-2016-inspection.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *Department of Veterans Affairs Records Management Program: Records Management Inspection Report*, Washington, DC, October 7, 2016, p. 13, at <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/pdf/va-2016-inspection.pdf>.

## Records Identifiers

Digitizing records associated with military service is often more difficult than it appears. Discharge paperwork is not uniform, unlike the large digitization effort for Blue Water Navy veterans, where the deck logs could be scanned in large quantities because they were in a similar format. The current DD Form 214 has been issued to separating servicemembers only since January 1, 1950. Prior to 1950, there were several different forms to prove military service such as: DA 1569 Transcript of Military Record; DD 256 Honorable Discharge Certificate; DD 257 General Discharge Certificate; and many more.<sup>75</sup> This means, for example, that individuals who served in World War II, left service, and then re-enlisted to serve in Korea would have two different discharge papers, but both are important for purposes of various benefits.

Another challenge in scanning large quantities of military records is that some identifying numbers associated with servicemembers have changed over time. Prior to certain dates, the U.S. military identified a servicemember by a service number (SN) and not by SSN. The use of SNs changed during the late 1960s and into the 1970s depending upon the individual's branch of service. The change from SN to SSNs happened on the following dates for members of each service branch:

- Army and Air Force—July 1, 1969;
- Navy and Marine Corps—January 1, 1972;
- Coast Guard—October 1, 1974.<sup>76</sup>

In order to digitize these records, a mechanism might be needed to identify the veteran by one or both of the record identifiers based upon the time period he or she served. There may be increased concern in cases where the veteran's service was non-consecutive, and when that service occurred, both before and after changes in identifying numbers.

## 10. What funds are available to support digitization of military service records?

NARA and VA have received various funds for digitization efforts, and some of these funds have been targeted for the NPRC. For FY2022, NARA received \$388.3 million, of which \$29 million “shall remain available until expended for expenses necessary to enhance the Federal Government's ability to electronically preserve, manage, and store Government records.”<sup>77</sup> Congress appropriated \$50 million (to remain available until September 30, 2022) to NARA via the Records Center Revolving Fund in P.L. 116-260, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, to offset the loss of user fees usually collected by the fund as a result of the pandemic. According to a letter from some Members of Congress to President Joe Biden and the Archivist of the United States, as of April 5, 2021, \$15 million from this funding had been allocated to NPRC.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *National Cemetery Administration: Veterans Military Discharge Documents*, March 17, 2020, at [https://www.cem.va.gov/hmm/discharge\\_documents.asp](https://www.cem.va.gov/hmm/discharge_documents.asp).

<sup>76</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *National Personnel Records Center: Service Numbers and Social Security Numbers*, February 25, 2020, at <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/social-security-numbers>.

<sup>77</sup> P.L. 117-103, 136 Stat. 278.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Warren Davidson, Member of Congress et al. to Joseph R. Biden, President of the United States, and David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States, April 5, 2021, at [https://republicans-veterans.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2021\\_4\\_6\\_rmb\\_davidson\\_ltr\\_re\\_nprc.pdf](https://republicans-veterans.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2021_4_6_rmb_davidson_ltr_re_nprc.pdf).

In the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Congress appropriated \$272 million to VA to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the benefits claims and appeals backlog.<sup>79</sup> VA stated that it is using \$150 million “to expand the scope of Federal scanning to reduce claims processing delays and reduce the current claims backlog by half. In addition, VA will provide digital copies of all scanned records to NARA to help expedite pending and future requests for any Veteran records.”<sup>80</sup>

Congress is also currently considering additional funds for records digitization. H.R. 8254, the FY2023 appropriations bill for Financial Services and General Government Operations, proposes an increased budget of \$427.5 million to NARA, of which \$30 million would remain available for electronic records preservation. The House passed this bill on July 20, 2022, as Division D of H.R. 8294, an omnibus appropriations bill providing funding for a number of government agencies. In the report accompanying H.R. 8254, the House Appropriations Committee wrote that the backlog of records requests persists at NPRC despite the \$50 million in emergency funding to the Records Center Revolving Fund. Further,

the Committee expects NARA to restore the NPRC to full operational capacity as quickly as feasible, to continue to use its emergency funding expeditiously to streamline operations and reduce the records backlog, and to continue to prioritize critical veterans records. The Committee directs NARA to provide quarterly reports detailing obligations and planned spending for this emergency funding, the current status of the backlog and an estimate for when it will be fully cleared, and lessons learned about NPRC operations as a result of the pandemic and recommendations for future improvements.<sup>81</sup>

On May 23, 2022, the General Services Administration (GSA) awarded a \$9.1 million loan to NARA from the Technology Modernization Fund (TMF) to modernize records delivery systems.<sup>82</sup> The funds are to be used for systems that process veterans’ records requests and systems that manage the workings of federal records centers.<sup>83</sup> NARA is required to repay the TMF over the next five years. For more information on this fund, see CRS Report R46877, *Federal Information Technology (IT) Budgeting Process in the Executive Branch: An Overview*, by Dominick A. Fiorentino, *Federal Information Technology (IT) Budgeting Process in the Executive Branch: An Overview*, by Dominick A. Fiorentino.

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<sup>79</sup> P.L. 117-2.

<sup>80</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA and NARA to digitize federal records for Veterans*, VAantage Point, August 5, 2021, at <https://blogs.va.gov/VAantage/92792/va-nara-digitize-federal-records-veterans/>.

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Congress, House Committee on Appropriations, *Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, 2023*, Report Together with Minority Views to Accompany H.R. 8254, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., June 28, 2022, H.Rept. 117-393 (Washington: GPO, 2022), p. 91.

<sup>82</sup> U.S. General Services Administration, *Technology Modernization Fund Announces Investments to Modernize Major Systems at USDA and NARA*, Washington, DC, May 23, 2022, at <https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/newsroom/news-releases/technology-modernization-fund-announces-investments-to-modernize-major-systems-at-usda-and-nara-05232022>. Relatedly, VA also received funds from the TMF in April 2022 for adjacent efforts. GSA awarded VA \$10.5 million in order to modernize the sign-in experiences at VA.gov and MyHealth.VA.gov, and seeks to improve the experience of Veterans to “digitally access benefits and services more reliably, equitably and securely.” U.S. General Services Administration, *Technology Modernization Fund Is Making It Easier and More Secure for Veterans to Access Benefits and Services*, Washington, DC, April 19, 2022, at <https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/newsroom/news-releases/technology-modernization-fund-is-making-it-easier-and-more-secure-for-veterans-to-access-benefits-and-services-04192022>.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Fahs, “\$9.1M Technology Modernization Fund Award Backs Updates to National Archives’ Legacy Systems,” *National Archives ISOO Blog*, June 3, 2022, at <https://isoo-overview.blogs.archives.gov/2022/06/03/9-1m-technology-modernization-fund-award-backs-updates-to-national-archives-legacy-systems/>.

## Appendix. Abbreviations

The common abbreviations listed in **Table A-1** are used throughout this report.

**Table A-1. Abbreviations**

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Term</b>
DOD	Department of Defense
DD-214	Certificate of Uniformed Service
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FY	Fiscal Year
JSRRC	Joint Services Records Research Center
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NOK	Next of Kin
NPRC	National Personnel Records Center
OMPF	Official Military Personnel File
SN	Service Number
SSN	Social Security Number
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration

### Author Information

Heather M. Salazar  
Analyst in Veterans Policy

Meghan M. Stuessy  
Analyst in Government Organization and  
Management

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