

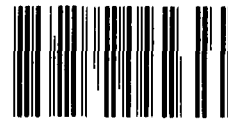
**GAO**

Briefing Report to the Chairman,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
House of Representatives

June 1986

# VA DISABILITY BENEFITS

## Timely Delivery of Military Service Medical Records to VA



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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

HUMAN RESOURCES  
DIVISION

June 24, 1986

B-223215

The Honorable G. V. (Sonny) Montgomery  
Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This briefing report is in response to your May 24, 1985, request that we review several issues concerning the Veterans Administration's (VA's) ability to obtain service medical records from military records centers. VA uses these records to determine whether veterans are eligible for disability compensation benefits.

In a later discussion with your office, we agreed to provide you with information on (1) the extent of untimely delivery of service medical records from the military to VA, (2) reasons why military records centers experience delays in providing these records, and (3) records centers' initiatives to improve their response time.

In doing our work between November 1985 and March 1986, we generally found that although there were large backlogs of requests in 1984, VA currently obtains service medical records from military records centers in a timely manner. Of its 1985 total of over 95,000 initial disability claims, VA identified 658 requests in process as of November 1985 for service medical records that had not been answered within 6 months and were still pending. This number represents only a small fraction of VA's total annual requests for these types of records. Veterans' service organizations also reported that few disability compensation claims were currently delayed because service medical records were not provided in a timely manner.

We were unable to determine how the current conditions compared to prior years because VA lacked relevant historical data. While military records centers continue to have some problems obtaining service medical records, mostly from military separation processing offices, and processing the requests, VA believes the military personnel records service centers are now more attentive to these requests. VA attributes the better

response times to better communications and cooperation from the records centers. According to VA and records center officials, several initiatives have been and are being taken to further improve response times. These initiatives are:

- The Army plans to eliminate the need for VA to resubmit requests when records are still in transit from separation processing offices to the Army Personnel Records Center. An automated process will hold all requests and provide the medical records to VA when they become available.
- VA plans to send the National Archives and Records Administration's National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) an automated tape of all VA regional office requests for medical records; these requests are currently mailed to NPRC. This process will save 3 to 5 mailing days and reduce lost or misrouted requests.
- NPRC plans to enter manually prepared requests to its data base and match them with the VA-provided tape to identify duplicate requests. This will improve NPRC processing capabilities and expedite responses to VA.

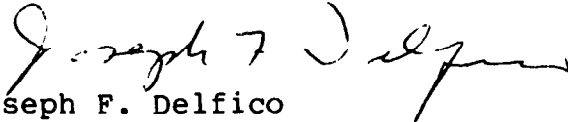
In doing our work, we relied on data provided by VA to establish the extent of untimely delivery of service medical records. We did not verify the accuracy of the data. In addition, we selected and visited the Army, Navy, and NPRC records centers and interviewed individuals who had knowledge of procedures and problems associated with obtaining service medical records. As a result of our discussion with your office, we did not visit other military records centers.

We discussed the information in this report with officials from the VA Compensation and Pension Service, the Army Center, and NPRC. All agreed with the report's contents.

As arranged with your office, we are sending copies of this briefing report to other congressional committees, the Administrator of Veterans Affairs, the Secretaries of the Army and Navy, and other interested parties on request.

For additional information, please contact me at 275-6193.

Sincerely yours,

  
Joseph F. Delfico  
Senior Associate Director

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### ABBREVIATIONS

NPRC	National Personnel Records Center
VA	Veterans Administration

## DELIVERY OF SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS

### TO THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION

In a May 24, 1985, letter to our office, the Chairman, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, stated that disability compensation claims of recently discharged veterans were being delayed because military records centers were not providing service medical records to the Veterans Administration (VA) in a timely manner. Stating that this problem had grown worse in the past year, the Chairman requested that we review the issue and identify ways to improve this condition.

VA and veterans' service organization officials stated that medical records problems occurred with all the military services; however, most complaints involved the processing of service medical records requests by the Army Reserve Personnel Center (Army Center).

The problem of untimely delivery of medical records during 1984 and early 1985 was aggravated by the large number of veterans' requests for replacements of service medals. The Army, the service most affected, diverted resources to accommodate these requests, causing requests for service medical records to become backlogged.

#### BACKGROUND

VA provides benefits to veterans who have suffered a loss of earning capacity because of service-connected impairments. VA administers this disability compensation program through 58 regional offices under the direction of its Department of Veterans' Benefits. In fiscal year 1985, VA paid over \$8 billion in disability compensation benefits to about 2.2 million veterans.

To determine the severity of the impairment and whether it occurred while the veteran was in the military service, VA regional offices need the veterans' service medical records. Service medical records basically consist of military entrance and separation examinations, health records, and dental records.

VA officials said that some veterans, after their military discharge, send their official service medical records directly to VA when they apply for disability benefits. At other times, military separation transfer points send records to VA if the individual applies for benefits before leaving the military service. Most medical records, however, are at each of the respective service records centers and are a part of the veteran's military file. Most VA requests for military medical records are directed to military records centers or the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). Each military records center

maintains service member files for a certain period before transferring the files to NPRC, which is the ultimate repositior of all military personnel records. VA and NPRC officials estimate that about 80 percent of all requests are addressed to NPRC.

#### OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

Our work focused on identifying the extent of untimely delivery of service medical records to VA, the reasons for delayed responses to service medical records requests, and records centers' initiatives to improve their response time.

We performed our work from November 1985 to March 1986. We reviewed a VA file containing VA's correspondence with military records centers from 1981 through 1985 to obtain a historical perspective of requests that were not answered in a timely manner. We used available VA data concerning requests for service medical records that had not been answered within 6 months.<sup>1</sup> We did not verify the accuracy of these data because this would have required us to verify the records of each of the VA regional offices that submitted the data to the VA central office for us. We determined that this effort would have been too time consuming and expensive. Further, we reviewed VA procedures for processing disability compensation cases and requesting service medical records and discussed related problems and practices with VA officials.

To obtain information on records centers' procedures for answering VA requests for service medical records, we visited the Army Center<sup>2</sup> and NPRC (both in St. Louis) and the Naval Reserve Personnel Center (Navy Center) in New Orleans. As a result of our discussion with staff from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, we did not visit other military records centers.

#### EXTENT OF UNTIMELY DELIVERY OF SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS

VA does not maintain statistics on either the number of requests for service medical records or the number of requests

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<sup>1</sup>VA has no written policy regarding an appropriate time frame for receiving medical records. A VA official told us, however, that VA is satisfied if medical records are received within 6 months.

<sup>2</sup>Before November 5, 1985, the Army Reserve Components Personnel and Administration Center was responsible for answering records requests. As a result of a reorganization, the Army placed its reserve personnel center in charge of all records management.

that are not processed in a timely manner. We were unable, therefore, to compare current conditions to prior years. Our review of VA's correspondence file for the period 1981-85 did not identify many specific examples of problems caused by untimely delivery of service medical records. However, at our request, VA's central office asked its regional offices to review its November 1985 work-in-process and to identify requests for service medical records that were pending 6 months or more.

As shown in table 1, VA identified, nationally, 658 disability compensation cases that were being delayed because requests for service medical records had not been answered within 6 months--584 (or 89 percent) were pending 6 months to 1 year, 64 (or 10 percent) from 1 to 2 years, and 10 (or 1 percent) for more than 2 years. VA data show that the problems primarily affect veterans from the Army and to a lesser extent the other military services.

Table 1:  
Period of Time VA Service Medical  
Records Requests Were Pending  
as of November 1985

<u>Service</u>	<u>6 to 12</u> <u>months</u>	<u>1 to 2</u> <u>years</u>	<u>Over 2</u> <u>years</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Percent</u> <u>of total</u>
Army	390	51	9	450	68
Navy	97	5	1	103	16
Air Force	49	4	-	53	8
Marine Corps	45	4	-	49	7
Other	<u>3</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	<u>584</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>658</u>	<u>100</u>

We believe that the extent of the current delays may be unavoidable and that they do not cause significant hardships for most veterans in light of the following information.

--During 1985, VA processed over 95,000 initial disability claims requiring service medical records. Since VA identified only 658 requests in process as of November 1985 that had not been answered within a 6-month period, this would suggest that most medical records were received within 6 months.

--Our review of case documentation for the 74 requests pending over 1 year as of November 1985 showed that only 1 of the alleged disabilities was considered a hardship case by VA. We reviewed 69 of the 74 cases (the status was unknown on 5 cases and we did not follow up on them)



in January 1986 and noted that 22, including the hardship case, had been denied disability benefits.

--VA officials told us that to reduce overall processing time, they concurrently develop other information for a claim while waiting for service medical records. VA's processing standards call for 75 percent of original disability claims to be processed in 6 months or less. During fiscal year 1985, VA processed 79 percent of its original disability claims within 6 months.

--Through contact with their members, veterans' service organizations can help identify processing delays. In January 1986, VA asked the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars to identify disability cases that were delayed because VA did not receive service medical records in a timely manner. A total of 48 problem cases were identified. The Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars told us the problem was not very significant. In February 1986, the American Legion, a long-time critic of processing delays, was not able to identify any specific problem cases attributable to VA's inability to obtain service medical records.

#### REASONS FOR DELAYED RESPONSES

Although the number of untimely responses to requests is relatively small, VA and military records center officials told us that delays can occur when the military services do not provide records, when the records centers use inefficient processing procedures, and when VA sends the request to the wrong records center.

#### Delays in Receipt of Files After Military Separation

If military records centers do not have files from the military services, they cannot make them available to VA on request. Army regulations state that separation transfer points should send the veterans' official military files to the appropriate records center within 5 days of separation. In February 1986, Army Enlisted Records Evaluation Center officials at Ft. Benjamin Harrison told us that military records are received from the separation transfer point in an average of 15 days. It then takes about 10 more days to process personnel data and forward the file to the Army Center.

Navy Center officials estimated that it takes less than 30 days on the average to receive military service records from separation transfer points and input the records into its system.

Even though separation transfer points generally submit service records in a reasonable time, service medical records may not be available when:

- A veteran files for disability benefits shortly after separation from the military service, since records may not yet have been submitted to records centers. Of the 74 cases we reviewed, 43 (or 58 percent) involved veterans who filed for disability benefits within 6 months of their separation from military service.
- A veteran's medical records are not included in his or her personnel file. According to records center officials, this occurs because the veteran did not provide the medical records to personnel officials, as required, at the time of separation or the separation transfer point personnel misplaced the records.

The Army has established procedures to better ensure that complete service records exist. The Army "enlisted" and "officer" processing centers check military files, identify missing documents (e.g., service medical records), and ask separation transfer points to send the records directly to the Army Center. The procedures, however, do not assure that all files received at the Center have complete records. The Army Enlisted Records Evaluation Center estimates that it receives over 3,100 service files annually that do not have service medical records. According to Army Center officials, however, it does not follow up on missing service medical records because of insufficient authority to control all phases of the transmission of records processed within the Army. The Center can only request records; it does not have the authority to demand personnel records from other Army divisions.

The Navy Center has procedures, comparable to the Army's, that involve sending letters to the separation transfer points until either the missing records or a satisfactory explanation is provided.

#### Time to Process VA Requests

VA and service organization officials have complained that in recent years the Army Center, which provided records for about 27,000 VA requests during 1985, has taken too long to respond to VA requests for service medical records. The Center has a 30-day objective for responding to VA requests if the records are immediately available.

The Army Center commander explained that, during 1984 and early 1985, VA requests were given low priority, due in part to other special projects imposed on the Center. During this period, employees who normally worked on VA requests were

diverted to help reduce a backlog of requests for replacements of service medals. As a result, the Center accumulated a backlog of 22,500 VA requests. As of April 1986, the backlog of VA requests was about 5,900.

The chief of the Army's Personnel Services Directorate stated that his office currently submits timely responses by meeting the 30-day objective for responding to most VA requests. Based on December 1985 data representing all types of VA requests, he showed us that 64 percent of VA requests are processed within 21 days, 91 percent within 45 days, and 98 percent within 60 days.

Center officials told us, however, that some internal limitations reduce their ability to process VA requests in a more timely manner:

--When the military service file is received at the Army Center, it takes about 30 days to input the file into the data base so it can be used to respond to a request.

--The Center has problems with automated procedures used to control case files and requests. In October 1985, the Center's Internal Review Group reported that the Center did not provide an effective system for controlling inquiries, and a large percentage of the data on case files was inaccurate.

NPRC is located with the Army Center at the St. Louis Records Center. It responds to about 1.5 million requests annually. Overall, VA did not express problems with NPRC's responsiveness to requests for service medical records. According to the NPRC director, most VA requests are not pending more than 6 weeks. In February 1986, the director estimated it took an average of 23 days for NPRC to process VA service medical records requests.

The Navy Center processes about 20,000 VA requests for service records each year. VA officials told us that the Center had no major problem responding to VA requests for service medical records. Navy data compiled in February 1986 showed that it takes an average of 19 days to answer a VA request for service records.

#### Misrouting of Requests by VA

VA contributes to delays in obtaining some service medical records. NPRC told VA in March 1986 that it receives an average of 37 service records requests each week that should have been routed by the VA regional offices to the cognizant military records center. Our analysis of the 74 VA requests pending more than 1 year showed that VA regional offices misrouted requests

in 14 cases. We could not determine the effect of these errors on VA's ability to obtain service medical records in a timely manner.

VA officials explained that misrouting can occur for various reasons, including confusion about the collocation and responsibilities of the Army Center and NPRC.

#### ACTIONS TAKEN TO IMPROVE RESPONSE TIMES FOR SERVICE MEDICAL RECORDS REQUESTS

VA, the Army Center, and NPRC have initiated several efforts to improve response time to VA requests.

#### VA and Army Initiatives

According to the director, VA Compensation and Pension Service, VA's ability to obtain service medical records from the Army Center in a timely manner decreased during late 1984 and early 1985. Because of this, starting in February 1985, the director met with the Center's commander to discuss the problems. As a result of these meetings, the Center began a special effort in April 1985 which reduced pending VA requests for service records from 22,500 to 2,500 by September 1985. As mentioned, the backlog increased to 5,900 (still an acceptable level by Army standards) in April 1986.

The director told us in February 1986 that VA's problem in obtaining service medical records from the Army Center had greatly subsided. He attributed the improvement to his direct intervention and the involvement of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and its request to our office. The director has also taken steps to ensure that communication channels stay open. On March 6, 1986, he met with two Army generals who manage the Center. He stated that VA and the Army are committed to work together on the problem.

The Army Center plans to eliminate the need for VA to re-submit requests when service records are in transit from separation transfer points. In fiscal year 1987, the Center plans to implement an automated process to hold all requests and provide the service medical records when the records become available. The Center will initially notify VA that a request has been received and will send VA a status letter every 45 days while the request remains open. In return, the Center wants VA regional offices not to send a request for service records until a veteran has been discharged at least 60 days. This process will reduce the Center's and VA's workloads caused by additional requests that presently can be generated every 30 days.

Another Army effort to improve processing of requests has resulted from the Army Center's internal review. The review revealed several weaknesses that affected records retention and retrieval. As a result, the Center conducted a physical inventory of records in January 1986 to verify the location of files charged out within the Center and to reconcile the automated charge-out system. Center officials told us that this reconciliation process will facilitate more timely responses to requests.

#### VA and NPRC Initiatives

According to VA and NPRC officials, VA plans to send NPRC an automated tape of all VA regional office requests for military service records; these requests are currently printed by the VA regional data processing centers and mailed to NPRC. During a 6-month trial period scheduled to begin in July 1986, NPRC will print all VA requests on a new form designed to facilitate better data exchange. NPRC will keep its own requests and forward those belonging to other records centers. This process is expected to save mailing and processing time and reduce the possibility of the request being lost or sent to incorrect addresses. NPRC also plans to enter manually prepared requests in its data base and match them with the VA-provided tape to identify duplicates. These procedures are designed to improve NPRC processing capabilities and, in turn, expedite responses to VA.

Since November 1985, NPRC has reduced pending requests by identifying relatively easy cases that can be worked on by lower graded personnel. NPRC officials told us that VA requests benefit from this procedure because higher graded personnel are available to process the more difficult requests.

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