

RECORD VERSION

STATEMENT BY

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Chairman Coffman, Representative Speier, Distinguished Members of this Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the Army Review Boards Agency and the Army Board for the Correction of Military Records. And, I am pleased today to have been able to bring several of my staff with me to watch today's hearing.

The Army Review Boards Agency provides the highest administrative level of review for personnel actions taken at lower levels of the Army. The Agency administers 12 boards, to include three statutory boards: the Army Board for Correction of Military Records, the Army Discharge Review Board and the Army Grade Determination Review Board. The remaining boards are policy boards, such as the Army Special Review Board (for evaluation appeals), the Suitability Evaluation Board (for removal of derogatory information from Soldier's personnel files), and the Ad Hoc Board (for consideration of officer elimination cases).

Since I last testified before this committee, the Army has added 20 new civilian positions to the Army Review Boards Agency, and our staff now consists of 132 civilian employees and 16 Soldiers. In addition, 120 Army employees serve as volunteer board members for the Army Board for Correction of Military Records (ABCMR). These volunteers are senior civilian employees drawn from across the Army Secretariat and Army Staff.

ABCMR case timeliness standards are prescribed in 10 U.S.C. § 1557. For applications received in a fiscal year (FY): (1) final action by the Corrections Board must be

completed for at least 90 percent of the applications within 10 months of receipt, and (2) all applications must be adjudicated within 18 months of receipt. The Secretary of the Army is required to submit a report to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees by June 1 following any FY when timeliness standards are not met, specifying the reason why and the corrective actions taken to ensure future compliance.

In 2017, the Secretary of the Army reported that the ABCMR did not meet the 10-month timeliness standard for cases received in FY 2015. This year (2018), the Secretary of the Army reported that for cases received in FY 2016, the ABCMR did not meet the 90 percent within 10 months or the 100 percent within 18 months timeliness standards.

The current ABCMR case backlog (i.e., inventory of cases over 300 days) is 13,806.

The reasons for the backlog include:

- a substantial reduction in Administrative case Closure (previously, in order to meet our congressional mandate, we used to immediately close applications that were not complete –for example, missing a social security number or personnel records were not available at the National Archives). We now hold incomplete applications open for 90 days while we work to add missing documents.
- a tremendous increase in cases in which we request advisory opinions from subject matter experts (this adds time to the case adjudication as we are required by law to refer these advisory opinions with the applicant and give them time to respond back). We started this practice in late 2014.

- increasing complexity of cases (especially involving post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and sexual assault trauma).
- ongoing business process reengineering efforts.
- subsequent to the previous hearing the agency completed the directed task to review more than 1400 California Army National Guard incentive cases before the end of July 2017. The successful completion of this time-sensitive and highly visible mission, required the allocation of a significant number of dedicated ABCMR staff. As a result, capacity for continued processing of older cases was reduced by 50 percent for an extended period.
- and finally a paradigm shift in focus, that is a focus on quality of adjudication decision over mere quantity. Two examples in which old practices would have resulted in a quick denial:
 - We recently granted a 2LT commission to a 98 year old WWII OCS graduate who was denied his commission because of his race, and
 - The President recently presented a Medal of Honor to a WW II veteran due in part to an ABCMR recommendation to upgrade his Distinguished Service Cross.

Unlike in the past, where the complete focus was on timeliness, the bottom line for the Army is that the Board for Correction of Military Records is now focused on how we can get to a fair result for the applicant. Since 2013, in fact, our overall grant rate has risen from 22% to its current 44%.

In view of the growing backlog of ABCMR cases and to improve the efficiency of ABCMR case adjudication, we have taken the following steps:

- completed agency transformation efforts. In the first three years of our effort, we focused on three major initiatives: electronic case processing, selection of our new case management system, and external stakeholder engagement. Our external stakeholder engagement has enabled countless improvements in streamlining touchpoints, clarifying authorities, and building relationships with 3rd parties for expediting case adjudication and/or avenues of administrative relief.
- refined application screening and streamlined advisory opinion requests to promote more timely processing; and expanded in-house medical staff to also support expedited processing.
- began streamlining the ABCMR's Record of Proceeding – to allow for ABCMR analysts to more quickly prepare cases to be boarded, and better identify the pertinent facts and issues for the ABCMR Board Members.
- recently implemented a quick wins initiative, designed to identify less-complex applications that do not require ABCMR consideration – an effort which has diverted more than 3,400 cases to other agencies for resolution at their level.
- simultaneously we implemented a Quick Hit initiative. We had approximately 6,000 cases in our inventory that met the same criteria as the quick win cases. The only difference was that we had already ordered the Army Military Human Resources Record and felt it was only appropriate that the ARBA Team service them instead of transferring to other Army organizations. Since February of this

year we have adjudicated 4500 of those 6,000, and will complete the remaining 1,500 by the end of this year.

- and finally increased the number of ABCMR Board sessions from 2 per week to 3 per week. This action increased monthly throughput by 33 percent, and we anticipate increasing this to 4 times per week in the coming months.

We are improving the board's operational capability by fielding of a modernized case tracking system and with a temporary manpower increase.

The ABCMR is currently supported by the legacy ARBA Case Tracking System (ACTS 1.0), which has been in use for over 15 years. This system was custom built 15 years ago strictly to track the hand-off of paper cases. At its inception, it was a huge leap forward; however, as the organization and technology evolved, ACTS no longer meets ARBA's mission objectives and stands in the way of ARBA transitioning to 100 percent digital business processes. This antiquated system costs ARBA millions of dollars in annual sustainment fees and lacks the agility to address changing business requirements and organizational roles. Our upgraded case tracking system (ACTS 2.0) will support our modernized new business processes and workflows. ACTS 2.0 will provide ARBA with a modern information technology system that will improve nearly every aspect of ARBA's mission. To upgrade this system we are partnering with the Board for Correction of Naval Records – both of us are using the same Government Off the Shelf system to upgrade our case tracking system - and we will be able to reuse many of the components they develop with their Navy Research, Development,

Technology and Evaluation (RDT&E) funding, just as the Navy might be able to do later with components developed with Army RDT&E funding.

Given current processing times, even with already approved ABCMR growth mentioned above, it would still take approximately 6 years to eliminate the backlog without additional resources. All of the actions outlined above will only ensure compliance with the law in a steady state. As we have learned over the past 24 months, only by eliminating the backlog will we be able to sustain compliance with the law.

With your support, we have been able to improve the adjudication ability of the ABCMR. Section 1559 of title 10 U.S. Code prohibits the Secretary of a military department from carrying out any reduction in the number of military and civilian personnel assigned to duty with the Service review agency below the baseline number for that agency until the Secretary submits to Congress a report that describes the reduction proposed to be made; provides the Secretary's rationale for that reduction; and specifies the number of such personnel that would be assigned to duty with that agency after the reduction; and a period of 90 days has elapsed after the date on which the report is submitted. This restriction on reducing the number of employees in the review boards agency expires on December 31, 2019. ARBA baseline strength in 2002 was 142 personnel. The manpower study referenced above brought ARBA's assigned strength back to the 2002 baseline.

At the end of the day, the Army is about its people. The men and women who serve our Nation, along with their families, are our most important asset. The Army Review Boards Agency is one of the ways we take care of our most important asset. I thank all of you for your continued support of our All-Volunteer Army and the Army Review Boards Agency.