

THANK YOU MR. CHAIRMAN – I APPRECIATE THE COMMITTEE HOLDING THIS BIPARTISAN MEMBER DAY HEARING TO DISCUSS IMPORTANT ISSUES AFFECTING OUR NATION’S VETERANS.

IN PA-12, I HEAR FROM CONSTITUENTS REGULARLY ABOUT FRUSTRATIONS RELATED TO THE NATIONAL PERSONNEL RECORDS CENTER OR NPRC AND THE GROWING BACKLOG OF UNPROCESSED REQUESTS FOR DOCUMENTATION FROM VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES.

THE NPRC HOUSES TWO MILLION CUBIC FEET OF MILITARY PERSONNEL AND MEDICAL RECORDS THAT ARE CURRENTLY ONLY AVAILABLE IN PAPER FORM.

SINCE IN PERSON STAFFING IS SO IMPORTANT FOR THE NPRC TO PROCESS REQUESTS, THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS PRESENTED A SERIOUS CHALLENGE. THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION, OR NARA, WHICH OVERSEES THE NPRC, ESTIMATES THAT THERE IS CURRENTLY A BACKLOG OF HALF A MILLION UNPROCESSED REQUESTS, INCLUDING SEVERAL REQUESTS FROM MY CONSTITUENTS DATING BACK AS FAR AS FEBRUARY OF LAST YEAR.

THAT MEANS VETERANS HAVE BEEN WAITING AS LONG AS 15 MONTHS FOR COPIES OF SERVICE RECORDS IN ORDER TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF VA BENEFITS, INFORMATION NEEDED TO ADJUDICATE

DISABILITY CLAIMS, OR OTHER DOCUMENTATION NEEDED TO REQUEST A COMMENDATION, AWARD OR REGALIA SUCH AS A PURPLE HEART OR CAMPAIGN SERVICE MEDAL.

DELAYS OF THIS MAGNITUDE TO ANY OF THESE REQUESTS ARE SIMPLY UNACCEPTABLE. OUR VETERANS EARNED THESE BENEFITS, AND IT IS UNCONSCIONABLE THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WOULD NEEDLESSLY MAKE THEM WAIT TO RECEIVE THEM.

ALONG WITH SEVERAL BIPARTISAN COLLEAGUES, I HAVE CONTACTED THE NPRC, WHITE HOUSE AND NARA TO EXPRESS CONCERN, GATHER INFORMATION AND OFFER SUGGESTIONS AND CONGRESSIONAL ASSISTANCE, YET THE NPRC CONTINUES TO BE OPEN AT ONLY 25 PERCENT CAPACITY TO PROCESS RETURNS, WHICH MUST BE DONE IN PERSON.

THE FIRST STEP TO EFFECTIVELY TACKLING THIS BACKLOG OF REQUESTS IS TO REOPEN THE NPRC AND GET EMPLOYEES BACK TO WORK SAFELY.

IT'S TIME FOR AMERICANS TO GET BACK TO WORK AND FOR BUSINESSES TO SAFELY REOPEN, USING VACCINES, MASKS, SOCIAL DISTANCING, PPE, AND OTHER TOOLS TO MINIMIZE SPREAD OF COVID-19. IF BUSINESSES CAN MAKE IT WORK, SO CAN THE GOVERNMENT.

NEXT, THE NPRC NEEDS TO WORK WITH THE VA TO ESTABLISH AND ROLL OUT BEST PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING BACKLOGS AND IMPROVING TURNAROUND TIME FOR THESE REQUESTS.

RIGHT NOW, THE NARA IS REPORTING THAT IT WILL TAKE ANOTHER 18-24 MONTHS TO FULLY ADDRESS THE BACKLOG. THIS TIMELINE MUST BE MOVED UP AND A NEW STRATEGY IS SORELY NEEDED.

I AM COMMITTED TO ENGAGING WITH THE NPRC TO MOVE TOWARD A SOLUTION THAT WILL ALLOW THEM TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM AS EFFICIENTLY AS POSSIBLE. GOING FORWARD, I BELIEVE CONGRESS, THE NARA, NPRC AND THE VA SHOULD WORK TOGETHER ON A CONTINGENCY PLAN SO THAT THIS PROBLEM NEVER ARISES AGAIN.

THIS INCLUDES THINKING THROUGH HOW REQUESTS CAN BE SUFFICIENTLY ADDRESSED EVEN WHEN FULL-CAPACITY STAFFING IS NOT POSSIBLE.

I LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH ALL RELEVANT ENTITIES TO SOLVE THIS CRITICAL ISSUE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE SO OUR VETERANS CAN GET THE LEVEL OF RESPONSIVENESS THAT THEY EARNED AND DESERVE. THANK YOU AND I YIELD BACK.