



PERSONNEL AND
READINESS

OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-4000

The Honorable William M. "Mac" Thornberry
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

2 8 DEC 2016

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The enclosed report is in response to House Report 114-537, page 175, accompanying H.R. 4909, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, which requests the Secretary of Defense review the feasibility of storing duplicate DNA samples in an alternate facility and provide the results of the review to the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives.

This report concludes that an alternate facility, for the storage of DNA reference samples, is feasible and desirable. Since 1992, the Armed Forces Repository of Specimen Samples program for accessioning, storing, retrieving and safeguarding reference samples for the United States Armed Forces and other federal agencies has proven invaluable to the successful identification of associated casualties. DNA reference specimens are irreplaceable. An alternate facility for duplicate specimens is the only means of preventing a potential irreparable loss of reference materials, which would disable the entire program. The Defense Health Agency has identified potential sites for an alternate facility and will assess these with other potential initiatives for support under constrained resources.

Thank you for your interest in the health and well-being of our Service members, veterans, and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Peter Levine", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Peter Levine
Performing the Duties of the Under Secretary of
Defense for Personnel and Readiness

Enclosure:
As stated

cc:
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member

REPORT TO CONGRESS

House Report 114-537, page 175, Accompanying H.R. 4909, The National Defense

Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017

Storage of DNA Samples of Members of the Armed Forces

Final Report



The estimated cost of this report or study for the Department of Defense is approximately \$8,900 in Fiscal Year 2016. This includes \$2,000 in expenses and \$6,900 in DoD labor.

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Summary

House Report 114-537, page 175, accompanying H.R. 4909, National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2017, Storage of DNA Samples of Members of the Armed Forces states that:

“The committee notes that the Department of Defense uses the Armed Forces Repository of Specimens for the Identification of Remains for the purpose of identifying human remains. The repository of DNA samples is critical to the identification of service members if they become casualties or Missing in Action and the remains are recovered. The committee is concerned that the storage of the original and duplicate DNA samples for members of the Armed Forces is in one location and could jeopardize future identification if the facility becomes inoperable. Therefore, the committee directs the Secretary of Defense to review the feasibility of storing duplicate DNA samples in an alternate facility and provide the results of the review to the Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives by December 1, 2016.”

Background

The Armed Forces Repository of Specimen Samples for the Identification of Remains (AFRSSIR) maintains a reference blood stain specimen for all Department of Defense military Service members and select Federal Government personnel for use in human remains identification. Since the inception of the program in 1992, 7.3 million bloodstain cards have been received, processed and stored at the 15,000 square feet AFRSSIR. The AFRSSIR inventory is routinely used to resolve questions of identity of service members in medico-legal death investigations by the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System (AFMES) under title 10 of the United States Code. Since 1992, DNA sequenced from these specimens has been used to positively identify over 5,000 military and civilian fatalities from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, and current conflicts.

Blood stain cards are stored in poly-foil vacuum sealed pouches at room temperature on custom designed shelves in the AFMES Headquarters at Dover Air Force Base (AFB), DE. A 24 hour video recording system monitors and records activity in and around this facility. AFMES Headquarters has restricted entry and entry is further restricted within the building to only authorized personnel with an access card. The Repository has hardened walls and a fire suppression system. Since transition of the repository from Gaithersburg, MD to Dover AFB in 2012, concerns have been raised as to the vulnerability of the specimens in natural disaster, fire, or terrorist activity. Evaluators of existing storage practices suggest that a redundant back-up repository should be created as an inventory safeguard. This position is further supported in light of recent terrorist attacks that have increased the need for DNA references and emphasized the vulnerability of any Government agency or activity to hostile acts. Any catastrophic incident, natural or manmade, could destroy a reference inventory maintained in a single location.

Assumptions in Establishing a Duplicate Storage Facility

a. The selected collection methodology used for the duplicate specimen must not alter the current process used by field collection sites.

b. The accession rate of specimens will continue at approximately 260,000 blood stain cards per year, based upon current force structure.

c. A redundant DNA storage facility need not mirror current AFRSSIR repository operations as it will be a storage facility only.

d. All current processing operations of redundant specimens could be incorporated into existing AFRSSIR operations, limiting redundant operations to warehouse and retrieval functions at the alternate facility.

e. Specimen Management System (SMS) data input is performed by the DNA processors at the AFRSSIR. Database requirements for any redundant system could be incorporated into the existing SMS and data archives system for both the primary and redundant facility, and should be stored separately at either facility.

f. The alternate facility should not be located near or in coastal ports-of-entry into the United States. Ideally, the location could be on a military installation for added security, but should be easily accessible for movement of specimens using commercial carriers or the United States Postal Service (USPS). The facility should not be located in cities that may have a high probability of terrorist attacks or those areas that require irradiation of delivery operations (USPS). The site should not be situated in a region of the country where inclement weather might impede access or response for retrieval of specimens. The alternate facility will require sufficient space to store many millions of reference specimens.

g. Only new samples accessioned into the AFRSSIR will go to the alternate repository. There are 7.3 million specimens archived at AFRSSIR. This proposal does not include identifying, retrieving, sampling, packaging, and shipping 1.6 million samples from current personnel, which is included in the 7.3 million figure.

h. The alternate facility and the redundant specimen samples it stores would be a part of the AFRSSIR and remain under the authority, direction, and control of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner in accordance with Department of Defense Instruction 5154.30, paragraph 2.5c.

Concept of Operations

a. Identify and establish an alternate facility for specimen samples at a location TBD.

b. Modify the current DNA specimen collection protocol to allow for the collection of two bloodstain cards from each donor, instead of the current single card. Both cards would be sent to AFRSSIR. AFRSSIR will retain the primary card at AFMES, Dover AFB. The second card would be in-processed at the AFRSSIR and then sent to the alternate facility for storage.

c. AFMES is exploring options relative to the optimal facility location.

Recommendation

An alternate facility for the storage of DNA reference samples is feasible and desirable. Since 1992, the AFRSSIR program for accessioning, storing, retrieving, and safeguarding of reference samples for the United States Armed Forces and other Federal agencies has proven invaluable to the successful identification of associated casualties. DNA reference specimens are irreplaceable. An alternate facility for duplicate specimens is the only means of preventing a potential irreparable loss of reference materials, which would disable the entire program. Defense Health Agency has identified potential sites for an alternate facility and will be assessed with other potential initiatives for support under constrained resources.