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NEWS RELEASE

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VA Health Care: A System in Crisis? **by Senator Larry Craig**

By now, most of you have probably heard at least some of the reports about terrible conditions at Building 18 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. My heart sank when I read these accounts, because these young men and women living there have sacrificed so much for our nation, and they deserve better.

Before I go any further, however, let me clarify just one thing. Because I am the top Republican on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, many Idahoans have urged me to take swift action to fix the problems at Building 18. But the soldiers receiving care at Walter Reed are still on active duty. Because they have not yet become veterans, oversight of their care falls under the jurisdiction of the Senate Armed Services Committee, not the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Having said that, I don't believe the VA system is perfect. But VA health care is, in fact, very good, and I'm not the only one who says so. Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Time Magazine, and the Annals of Internal Medicine have all separately given praise to VA health care. For the seventh year in a row, VA's health care system outscored the private sector in the University of Michigan's Consumer Satisfaction Survey.

In that survey, 91 percent of VA's patients rated VA as having good customer service. VA's inpatient care received 84 percent satisfaction ratings, compared to the private sector's 73 percent. The survey also said 82 percent are satisfied with their outpatient care – again, 11 points better than the private sector.

Those ratings are pretty good, but we should strive for 100 percent satisfaction. Those not satisfied with VA probably have a reason to be so. I'm not going to argue with that. What I am going to do is offer them a choice in health care.

On March 8, I introduced a bill in the Senate that allows veterans with service-connected disabilities to seek their health care wherever they want. No strings. The only condition is that the facility or provider the veteran chooses must qualify for TRICARE or Medicare, and that is simply to assure a level of quality in the care they will receive.

Since I am so confident in the high quality of VA health care, you might ask why I would give veterans a ticket out. Because I believe VA has nothing to fear. I believe most veterans will continue to

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use the high-quality care VA provides. But if many veterans choose to leave, it will tell me something very valuable: that veterans feel they can get better service outside the VA system. If they stay, we learn that we have something good.

If there are systematic problems with VA, we should fix them, but it may take months or even years for the federal government to study and pinpoint the problems and their solutions. I think the number of veterans who don't trust VA for their care is small. But if they don't trust VA, my bill will allow them to seek another health care provider right away, instead of waiting for the problems to be resolved.

We have all of the objective studies, articles, and reviews that say VA health care is good. I believe them, because I've been to a number of VA facilities to see for myself. But we ought to find out what our veterans think, by letting them "vote with their feet." I wouldn't be surprised if most stay right where they are.