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Groundbreaking for Veterans
by: Senator Larry Craig

It's been a long road, but I'm pleased that an important project for Idaho's veterans is near completion. On Wednesday, August 13, I will attend a groundbreaking ceremony for the new Veterans Regional Office in Boise. This new facility is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs' nationwide effort to relocate its regional offices back to the sites of VA Medical Centers to make it easier for our veterans to receive care.

The Boise Veterans Affairs Regional Office administers monetary benefits to more than 17,000 veterans in Idaho, Oregon, and Utah. Many people may not know it, but currently, our veterans must collect their benefits from the regional office and then walk or drive nearly half a mile to the medical center to receive care. This is not just inefficient and inconvenient -- it's a real obstacle for some veterans, and that makes it unacceptable.

There was a time when Boise's Veterans Regional Office was located inside the Boise Veterans Medical Center on the grounds of Old Fort Boise. Veterans discussed their benefits and saw their doctors, all in the same place. But as Idaho grew, and more and more veterans were welcomed into our great State, the regional office was forced to lease a location away from the medical center to accommodate them, because there was not enough space on the grounds for a new building.

Still, the plan was always to move the regional office back to the medical center, and in 2003, the General Services Administration offered a solution: to transfer to the Department of Veterans Affairs an unused parking lot next to the medical center. Unfortunately, times had changed in the ten years since the regional office had moved, and property in the heart of downtown Boise had become much more valuable, causing the federal Office of Management and Budget to halt the land transfer.

That's when I became involved. As Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I authored legislation with Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson to authorize a transfer of land adjacent to Boise's VA Medical Center to the Department of Veterans Affairs. In 2004, President George Bush signed that legislation into law.

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But that was just the beginning. Over the past four years, I used my senior position on the Senate Appropriations Committee to secure nearly \$9 million for the construction of the new regional office. Working with VA Regional Office Director Jim Vance and others, we ensured that the project moved forward and would be completed on time.

I am proud to say that what was once a parking lot next to the Boise VA Medical Center will soon be a great new facility that will serve thousands of Idahoans. The new 25,000 square foot Boise VA Regional Office is scheduled to be completed in late 2009. In just a little over a year, our veterans will no longer have to travel from location to location to receive the attention they deserve.

Many people have helped and are helping to make this possible, and I'd like to thank everyone involved with this important project. I have spent more than a decade supporting veterans' issues, and this groundbreaking is a capstone to a lot of hard work accomplished on behalf of Idaho and American veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs in Idaho is among the very best in the United States, and we all should be proud that veterans in Idaho receive the respect and recognition they deserve. I now look forward next year to attending the dedication ceremony for the new Boise Veterans Affairs Regional Office.