

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing on the Construction and Lease Authorization Needs of the
Department of Veterans Affairs

May 11, 2006

Rep. Tom Feeney

I would like to thank Chairman Buyer, Ranking Member Evans, Chairman Brown of the Subcommittee on Health and the entire Veterans' Affairs Committee for the opportunity to discuss this issue that is critical to the veterans of the State of Florida.

The veterans' population in the United States and Puerto Rico currently stands at 26,549,704. More than 1.8 million of these veterans reside in Florida. Our state has the second largest veterans population in the country with over 350,000 veterans located in the Central Florida area. This does not include those veterans who choose to make Florida their home during the winter months of the year and veterans who visit the numerous vacation areas in Central Florida, which can number in the thousands.

Yet Central Florida is the largest metropolitan area with out a VA Medical Complex. Many veterans residing in Central Florida average 2 hours of travel time to get to a VA hospital located in Tampa, Gainesville or Jacksonville. This includes veterans living in Orange, Seminole, Brevard, Volusia, Osceola, Polk and Lake Counties. In fact, only 45% of veterans in the Orlando region are within the VA's access standards for hospital care.

Central Florida is the number one destination for combat veterans and veterans 65 years or older. It is also the number one area for veterans who have 50% or more service connected disability. 18% of our veterans have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

There are 128 active veterans organizations in the Central Florida area. My constituent, John Kellat, is the Chaplain for the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), and drives veterans from New Smyrna Beach to the nearest facility in Gainesville. A Central Florida facility would cut his drive time almost in half, making it more convenient for veterans in the area and also cutting down on the cost to Service organizations like the DAV and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). A closer facility would also mean veterans would pursue the medical services provided by the VA and lead to a better quality of life.

Leaders like Jerry Pierce, President of the Central Florida Veterans, Inc.; Charlie Brenner, past President of the Central Florida Veterans, Inc. and Dr. Neil Euliano, Chairman of the Central Florida Veterans Memorial Park Fund have worked diligently to express the critical importance of a new medical facility to our area veterans. I have also received countless correspondence from constituents like Brigadier General (Ret.) Bill

Carlson, US Army, Colonel (Ret.) Joe Kittinger, US Air Force and Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) Earle Denton, US Army, regarding the urgent need for the hospital.

Orlando and its surrounding area was identified by the VA through the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) program as an area in need of a new VA Medical Center. At the same time, CARES identified the need for a new medical complex in Las Vegas, Nevada. This need was appropriate and warranted and I am pleased that the facility in Las Vegas has received funding and is scheduled to break ground this year. However, a hospital in Central Florida still remains an idea.

Design and construction initiatives have been authorized by the VA and efforts are underway to select a site that best suits the needs of the Central Florida veterans' community. Balancing the accessibility needs of Central Florida's veterans with the long term, economic impact the hospital will have on the State is essential as we look for ways to leverage funds to maximize investment benefits.

The Florida Board of Governors recently approved a proposal from the University of Central Florida to build a new medical school in the East Orlando area. I am enthused by the economic benefits a new medical school at UCF will bring to the entire state, attracting more doctors and high-tech biomedical industries to the region. This will be valuable to both local veterans and the VA as a medical school environment provides insight into innovative and cutting edge technologies and can serve as a vehicle for sharing expensive medical equipment.

We also have confirmation from Orlando's Florida Hospital that they look forward to partnering with the VA to help share in the costs of diagnostic equipment and contribute to residency and staffing needs. This commitment will ensure that veterans have access to additional resources to further enhance the medical services the VA may offer to them.

Concerns have arisen from Central Florida veterans associations in the area that a Central Florida VA Medical Center will not come to fruition. At a May 1st Public Hearing administered by the Orlando VA Hospital Site Selection Committee, many veterans were accusing lawmakers of not caring for veterans because of the slow process that has been made.

Veterans in Central Florida have been waiting for nearly three decades for a new complex that has continuously met delays. I urge the VA to select a site in a timely manner so that our growing veterans' population may finally have appropriate access to vital health care services.

Again I appreciate this opportunity to express Central Florida's immediate and urgent need for a medical facility and look forward to working with you all to make this important project a reality in the near future.