

January 6, 2005

HARKIN URGES SECRETARY PRINCIPI TO KEEP VA HOSPITAL IN KNOXVILLE

Principi to visit hospital tomorrow

WASHINGTON, D.C. - On the eve of a visit to the Knoxville VA Medical Center by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) urged the Bush Administration to maintain existing VA services at the facility.

In a letter to Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi, Harkin requested a more detailed analysis of the closure's potential impact on inpatient care in Knoxville and its surrounding rural communities. Principi is visiting the VA facility at the request of Congressman Leonard Boswell (D-IA).

"Iowa's veterans need the Knoxville VA hospital. Closing this facility without adequate planning and review is just plain irresponsible, Harkin said. "This closing has the potential to slash access to care for Iowa's veterans. Before any action is taken, we must ensure that we assess the potential impact on Iowa veterans."

In August of 2003, the VA proposed the Capitol Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) program in an attempt to place facilities closer to where veterans live and cut underused and outdated facilities. Although the process was intended to provide a comprehensive review of veterans' health care needs and services, it failed to address the impact of proposed changes on long-term care, nursing home care, mental health needs and on those living in rural areas. In May of 2004, the CARES commission recommended that the Knoxville VA Medical Center's inpatient facilities be closed.

"The war on terrorism and the Iraq War have spawned a vast new generation of wartime veterans. At this time in our nation's history, more veterans are in need of health care than ever before," Harkin said. "Unfortunately, this closing will deny many Iowa veterans that critical access, and it will disrupt the lives of the elderly long-term care patients at the hospital."

In November of 2003, Harkin introduced an amendment to the VA-HUD appropriations bill that would stop the Department of Veterans Affairs from closing certain VA hospitals, including the Knoxville facility that provides vital health care services to thousands of Iowa veterans. The amendment would have barred any funding from being spent to shut down the hospital or services until the actual impact on veterans that would be affected by these cuts is determined.

Harkin is a long time advocate for providing veterans with the high quality health care they deserve. He has fought for increased funding for the VA through the Appropriations Committee and has urged the VA to allocate more funding for its veterans hospitals.

January 6, 2005

Honorable Anthony J. Principi

Secretary of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Avenue

Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As you know, the Capitol Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) process was intended to provide a comprehensive review of veterans' health care needs and services as the Veterans Affairs (VA) Administration seeks to realign its health care system. I am sure you are aware that the CARES commission recently recommended that the Knoxville, Iowa VA Medical Center's inpatient facilities be closed.

I understand that you will be touring the Knoxville VA Medical Center this week. Unfortunately, I am unable to join you and Congressman Leonard Boswell for that important visit, but I am pleased and grateful that you are making good on this commitment. As you know from past communication, I join Congressman Boswell in imploring you to use your authority as Secretary to keep all existing facilities at the Knoxville VA Medical Center operating fully.

The War on Terrorism and the Iraq War are generating a large new generation of wartime veterans. More US veterans are in need of health care than ever before. The plan to build community-based outpatient clinics notwithstanding, it is not responsible to shut down facilities and slash services in Knoxville. The proposed closure there would deny Iowa veterans critical access to quality health care and would disrupt the lives of the hospital's elderly, long-term care patients.

Please slow down the process regarding Knoxville's VA inpatient facilities to allow for a more detailed analysis of the potential impact that closing would have on inpatient care for veterans in Knoxville and surrounding rural communities.

Thank you for your assistance on this issue of importance, and for your service.

Sincerely,

Tom Harkin

United States Senator