

Rep. Ed Perlmutter

“Issues Relating to the Construction Process and Resulting Priorities within the Veterans Administration”

Written statement of U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter
Colorado’s Seventh Congressional District
Before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

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Chairman Akaka, Senator Burr and distinguished members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to briefly testify today on an issue that has been of great concern to the Colorado veterans and veterans receiving medical care in the Veterans Integrated Service Network 19 Rocky Mountain Network. That issue has been the need for a new state-of-the-art Veterans Administration stand-alone medical center at the former Fitzsimons Army Base in Aurora, Colorado.

But before I begin I would like to acknowledge the work of former Senator Ken Salazar on this project, he was a strong partner with me, as was former Senator Wayne Allard, in ensuring the construction of this hospital. Now, I am equally pleased that Senator Mark Udall and Senator Michael Bennet picked up where Senators Salazar and Allard left off. We are all working together with the rest of the delegation and General Shinseki to fulfill our promise to our veterans to provide them the best healthcare possible. This is the least we can do for their dedicated service to our country.

There are an estimated 426,000 veterans in Colorado, and 700,000 in VISN 19 whose major VA medical facility simply doesn’t cut muster. They deserve a medical facility worthy of their service. It is our duty to give the VA the resources to make world class care available to world class soldiers. Many of them were wounded in battle, and many of them will rely on intensive medical care from the Veterans Administration for the rest of their lives.

In 1998, with the cost of healthcare and the cost to maintain older VA facilities continuing to grow, Congress established the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services Commission, or CARES Commission. The goal was to create an objective panel of experts to address the best way to consolidate existing VA facilities and potentially build new ones. After all, an independent commission is really the only venue whereby effective decisions--though sometimes politically difficult—can be made.

In 2004, following 38 public hearings and over 200,000 public comments, the CARES study was completed and accepted by then Secretary Anthony Principi. The study illustrated the need for a replacement facility for the outdated and obsolete, nearly 60 year old, Denver VA Medical Center. They concluded the existing facility had a space deficit of 242,000 square feet for

inpatient and outpatient needs. Moreover, they found significant problems with patient privacy at the existing facility. These problems were—and continue to be—so bad the Commission deemed the replacement facility at Fitzsimons a high priority of the VA.

Since the 2004 CARES study, the process of seeking a final resolution to move forward with the actual construction of the new Aurora VA Medical Center has been a frustrating history of indecision and reversal of construction plans. With each succeeding VA secretary, we have seen the plans alternate between a shared facility and a stand-alone facility. Enough is enough! Congress has authorized \$568,400,00 for the project, of which \$188,300,000 has already been appropriated. Property has been purchased and we are ready to turn dirt.

On March 18, 2009, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki met with the Colorado Congressional Delegation to announce the VA will move forward with the construction of a new stand alone VA Medical Center at the Fitzsimons site in Aurora, Colorado. The new medical center will provide a full range of medical, laboratory, research and counseling services including a new spinal cord injury unit recommended by the CARES Commission report. Moreover it will be a joint facility with DOD to provide care for personnel stationed at installations throughout Colorado and VISN 19, as stipulated in the CARES report.

In order to accomplish this, President Obama's budget proposes spending \$1.19 billion in FY 2010 for construction of major projects within the VA. Of that, he has budgeted \$119 million for the new Fitzsimons facility. We are anticipating a groundbreaking for construction of the new facility in August, which will create thousands of jobs and put our veterans that much closer to the care they deserve. I applaud Secretary Shinseki and President Obama for bringing closure to this long awaited decision to move forward with a project that is so critical to health care needs of the veterans served by VISN-19.

The veterans of Colorado very much appreciate the support this project has received from the members of this committee. They will continue to need this support as we move forward to see this vision become a reality. In order to do this, we will also need your assistance to increase the authorization level. Currently the authorization is \$568,400,000. However, the VA estimates the construction will be \$800 million. I look forward to working with both senators from Colorado and members of this committee to enact this necessary authorization.

Lastly I would also like to acknowledge the very active veteran service organizations in Colorado who have played such a crucial role in fighting for this project for years. This final decision has taken well over 10 years for the Department of Veterans Affairs to reach. Also critical to this team effort were the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, the Children's Hospital, and the City of Aurora.

I want to thank the Chairman for visiting the Fitzsimons campus site several months ago and I want to thank the committee staff for their dedication to ensuring quality healthcare for our veterans. I ask the members of the Senate VA Committee to continue their support for the stand-alone VA medical center in Aurora, Colorado in order to meet the needs of veterans in Colorado and throughout the Rocky Mountain West.

Thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.