

Senator Mark Udall

TESTIMONY OF SEN. MARK UDALL

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I am glad to have the chance to testify today about the new – and, we hope, final – plan for the VA Medical Center on the Fitzsimons campus in Aurora, Colorado.

As you know, the current medical center in Denver is nearly sixty years old, is at full capacity and does not meet the needs of our veterans. At the existing VA hospital in Denver, veterans sometimes have to wait months to see a doctor, and veterans with spinal-cord injuries have to travel to other states for treatment.

That's why the proposal for the development of a state-of-the-art veterans' facility at Fitzsimons was a centerpiece of the VA's capital construction plan under the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services, or CARES program.

Five years ago, as part of the CARES plan, Denver was identified as a city in urgent need of a new VA medical center. Today, there is still no new hospital, and the need is still urgent, as thousands of young veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan require care for their physical and mental wounds, in addition to more than 400,000 other veterans in the region who require care.

I am so pleased to be able to say that while there have been a few bumps on the road – three secretaries of Veterans Affairs, numerous plans, and many intervening years – Fitzsimons is again one of the highest priorities for the VA.

As you know, Secretary Shinseki listened to the concerns of the Colorado Congressional delegation, our local veterans' community and veterans' service organizations, and his own advisors. And earlier this year he concluded that a stand-alone full-service hospital with comprehensive specialty care services – to include a 30-bed Spinal Cord Injury Center – is essential in order to meet the needs of veterans throughout the Rocky Mountain Region.

We are excited that the plan also includes constructing new Health Care Centers in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Billings, Montana; a number of new clinics and rural health sites; and an outpatient and administrative building at Buckley Air Force Base in Colorado.

I understand the new estimate for the hospital's total cost is \$800 million, with \$119 million requested in the president's fiscal year 2010 budget. As you know, Mr. Chairman, Congress has so far authorized \$568 million for the hospital, but this is not enough to get us to the finish line with these updated cost estimates. I hope to work with the Committee to increase these levels.

I want to thank my colleague Representative Perlmutter and my former colleague and now Secretary Ken Salazar for leading the charge when it appeared that the VA would not make good on its promise to build a stand-alone hospital at Fitzsimons. Rep. Perlmutter has worked tirelessly to make this hospital a reality and to provide care for Colorado's veterans. Senator Bennet has quickly picked up where Senator Salazar left off and is pushing hard to get the project underway.

I have also worked hard on behalf of our veterans in Colorado. So I am delighted – after fighting for a veterans hospital for years as a member of the House – that I am testifying before you in the Senate, at a time when we can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. I know all of us here look forward to the groundbreaking in August.

I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the members of this committee for your support over the years, and ask that your support continue as we work to secure the funding necessary to finally complete this project.