

CHAIRMAN LARRY E. CRAIG - Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS= AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING ON
REBUILDING THE GULF COAST
FOLLOWING HURRICANE KATRINA

November 10, 2005
Room SD-138, Dirksen Senate Office Building

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. The Committee will come to order. The Committee meets this afternoon to hear from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and his staff on the efforts VA is undertaking to reestablish services and rebuild VA facilities along the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Before we begin to talk about the future of VA in the region, I'd like to spend just a moment recognizing VA's past efforts, specifically those in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina's landfall.

As many of you may know, VA was one of the few bright lights to shine through the devastation that hit the region. Advanced planning and a well-known electronic medical records system helped to ensure that VA could coordinate and move thousands of staff and patients to facilities across the United States without a single loss of life attributed to the lack of medical attention. In addition, VA staff members volunteering thousands of hours of their time to assist veterans and other citizens in the affected communities ensured that the aftermath of this storm went as smooth as possible.

While more people than I can possibly name are responsible for that success, I want to especially recognize the gentlemen sitting in front of me today. Secretary Nicholson, Dr. Perlin, and Mr. McClain your efforts ensured that emergency response plans were created in advance of the storm and implemented. In particular though, I want to single out the fourth member of our panel today, Dr. Robert Lynch.

Dr. Lynch was VA's "man in charge" on the ground in the Gulf. He and his staff worked countless hours for the good of thousands of our veterans. Dr Lynch, I hope you know how proud we all are of your efforts and those of your staff. You lead a truly remarkable group of individuals. And I hope you will pass on our highest compliments to all of them. Like so many private houses and businesses, the Department of Veterans Affairs experienced a significant amount of destruction and damage during Hurricane Katrina. The VA's Medical Center in Gulfport, Mississippi was totally decimated by the storm. In New Orleans, VA's medical facility experienced significant flooding on the lower floors and wind damage on the upper floors. That damage, coupled with a lack of electricity and ventilation raises serious concerns as to whether the interior of this building is beyond repair.

In addition, VA has no Regional Office in New Orleans at this time to handle disability compensation payments and other benefits matter. The office was located in a postal building in downtown New Orleans that sustained water damage and has not re-opened. Even VA's one working medical facility in the Gulf Region -- the Biloxi VA Medical Center -- sustained some structural damage and is in need of repairs.

Putting all of these pieces back together again will be a massive undertaking. It will not be easy or inexpensive. VA is confronted with the fact that there is no real medical infrastructure at all in New Orleans. Both LSU and Tulane Medical Schools, which were a significant source of medical staff for VA's facilities in the region, are not open. Even many of the veterans who relied on facilities along the coast are now living in other areas of Mississippi and Louisiana.

To address the financial considerations facing VA, the President recently sent his third Hurricane Supplemental request to Congress. This request identified \$1.15 billion to help VA's rebuilding efforts at the facilities I just mentioned. Further, the bill includes \$300 million to purchase new equipment and replace pharmaceuticals which were lost or destroyed during this emergency. I look forward to the Secretary's testimony to get some more detailed information about these rebuilding efforts and perhaps some estimates on timelines and other challenges we face.

With that, I want to welcome Secretary Nicholson and his staff. We look forward to your testimony. First, let me turn to the Ranking Member, Senator Akaka for any opening comments he might have.