

Ranking Member Larry E. Craig

STATEMENT OF SENATOR LARRY E. CRAIG

HEARING BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS TO  
CONSIDER  
PENDING HEALTH LEGISLATION

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing and good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, I have two bills on the agenda that I've introduced and one that I am very proud to have introduced along with you. Of course, I think our legislation on caring for veterans with Traumatic Brain Injuries is an important, bipartisan effort.

I know everyone on this committee shares our concern about the immediate, acute care needs of those veterans suffering with TBI as well as the long-term implications of living with a traumatic brain injury. With this bill, Mr. Chairman, I think we are attempting to address many of those concerns as well as focus on the need to do more research on traumatic brain injury. Unfortunately, the fact remains that medically there is so much we don't know about TBI. I hope we can advance this bill quickly.

As I mentioned earlier, I also have two other bills on the agenda: S. 815, the Health Care Empowerment Act and S. 1441, a bill to modernize our successful State Veterans Home program.

First, Mr. Chairman, I am sure you have seen CBO's preliminary cost estimate of S. 815. Needless to say, it came in much higher than I had expected. I want to assure my colleagues that I am still a fiscally conservative Senator.

With that said, I still believe we must consider some way to ensure that those who receive care at VA have confidence in that care. And if they don't have confidence, we should consider some recourse for them.

Frankly, I have been heartened by the reaction S. 815 has received. I have gotten numerous letters and emails supporting the legislation. And, of course, a few witnesses, including those today, have offered positive comments as well as some thoughts on changes that should be considered.

I intend to review all of those thoughts and others while I work to address the scope and cost of this bill before ever asking for a vote on it.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to say a word about the state home bill I've just introduced. I recognize that few people have had a chance to review it. As such, I anticipate receiving more comments in the future on the legislation

What's important to me, Mr. Chairman, is the goal of the bill. That is - to transition the state home program from one focused heavily on beds to one that also offers the options of home and community-based care.

I hope none of you see this bill as a shot of disapproval aimed at the state homes. It is nothing of the sort. Rather, it simply reflects my view that this program needs to have a more forward-looking, family-oriented approach to long-term care.

At the current rate of Congressional funding, it will take us 9 more years to fund all of the new construction on VA's list today. That doesn't include any new applications that will come in. I fear that if we don't begin to transition to a more non-institutional approach to care, we may find ourselves 15 years from now, staring at 30,000 state home beds wondering what to do with half of them.

There's an old saying that goes "when all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like nails." I fear that if the state homes only have beds, then beds will be the way we care for aging veterans.

I believe we should begin to establish non-institutional care programs to compliment the current institutional program. In this way, we will be able to offer veterans a less restrictive alternative long-term care setting while supporting the idea of aging gracefully in the home with one's family.

I hope my colleagues, VA, VSOs, and the States, are willing to work with me on this legislation. I welcome all suggestions and, of course, support.

With that, Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this hearing. I look forward to receiving the testimony of our witnesses.