

The Honorable Mel Martinez, US Senator from Florida

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans Affairs

Hearing on
The Construction and Lease Authorization Needs of the
Department of Veterans Affairs

April 6, 2006
Room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building

Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL)

I would like to thank Chairman Craig and the VA Committee for having this hearing on this matter of great importance to Florida.

More than 1.8 million veterans reside in the State of Florida and more veterans are choosing to call Florida home every day. Over the past ten years, outpatient visits to Florida's veteran health centers have more than doubled. And more than 10,000 veterans from the Global War on Terror have sought medical care through the VA in our state.

Securing plans for a new Orlando VA Hospital has been one of my top priorities since before I came to office and remains a priority today. As former Orange County Mayor I saw firsthand the extensive growth of the Orlando area and the definitive need we have to increase access to healthcare for our veterans.

Orlando and the surrounding area is the home of the largest population of veterans in the state. Only forty-five percent of veterans in the Orlando region are within the VA's access standards for hospital care. The VA as part of the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services identified the growing needs of Central Florida and authorized the design and construction of the Orlando VA Hospital, which will serve the region's nearly 400,000 veterans.

Dr. Robert Ratliffe, the Director of the Orlando VA Medical Center, is in the process of putting together a leadership team to ensure that the needs of veterans in Central Florida are addressed in the design, placement, and construction of the hospital.

Currently six sites in southeast Orlando are being considered for the hospital. The VA site selection committee will be visiting our state in the upcoming weeks to do an analysis of each of the sites. I urge the VA to select a site in Central Florida in a timely manner.

One of the most important aspects of the Orlando VA hospital is accessibility. This new facility will give Central Florida veterans access to VA healthcare without traveling long distances for their inpatient care.

The site that is selected will house the 130 bed Hospital, Nursing Home, and Domiciliary and Rehabilitation Center and will employ 2000 people from the community.

The extension of this project is essential to delivering the high quality of care our veterans deserve.

Our men and women in uniform have fought for our safety and security. I believe we owe America's veterans and their families our gratitude. We must care and provide for our veterans as they have fought and cared for us.