

CONGRESSMAN LEE TERRY, 2ND DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN LEE TERRY  
2ND DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
AUGUST 20, 2009

WHEN I WAS FIRST ELECTED TO CONGRESS, NEARLY 11 YEARS AGO I TOURED THE OMAHA VA MEDICAL FACILITY. THE TOUR WAS A QUICK LOOK AT THE BUILDING THAT CARES FOR OUR VETERANS. AT THE SAME TIME MY CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE WAS RECEIVING COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE QUALITY OF CARE, THE RUN DOWN NATURE OF THE FACILITY AND THE POOR ATTITUDE OF THE EMPLOYEES.

IN 2003 AL WASHKO TOOK OVER AS NEW DIRECTOR FOR THE OMAHA VA MEDICAL CENTER. FROM DAY ONE MR. WASHKO REALIZED THE VAST PROBLEMS AT THE FACILITY. HE IDENTIFIED AND QUANTIFIED THE PROBLEMS AND PUT THE VA ON A PATH TO INCREASED QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE IMPROVED ATTITUDE OF THE EMPLOYEES. SINCE MR WASHKO HAS BEEN IN CHARGE MY OFFICE HAS RECEIVED VERY LITTLE

COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE OMAHA VA.

I AM PROUD TO HELP WITH FUNDING TO MAKE MUCH NEEDED REPAIRS TO THE FACILITY. SOME OF THOSE IMPROVEMENTS INCLUDE: NEW ICU, NEW MRI, UPDATED SURGERY SUITES AND RENOVATED ER.

LATER I REQUESTED MONIES FOR THE MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IT WOULD HAVE COST JUST TO UPGRADE THE HVAC SYSTEM. WHEN I TOURED THE FACILITY IT BECAME VERY APPARENT THAT WE WERE USING "DUCT TAPE" TO TRY AND FIX MAJOR PROBLEMS.

WHEN I THEN MET WITH MR. WASHKO I WANTED HIS OPINION ON WHETHER BUILDING A NEW VA HOSPITAL WAS NEEDED. HIS RESPONSE WAS OVERWHELMINGLY YES!

IN JULY 2005 I WROTE A LETTER TO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS ASKING FOR ASSISTANCE IN INITIATING A FEASIBILITY STUDY TO IMPROVE THE VETERANS HEALTH CARE IN OMAHA.

IN 2007 I MET WITH THEN SECRETARY JIM NICHOLSON ABOUT THE CURRENT TROUBLING FACILITIES AT THE OMAHA VA. I PARTNERED WITH MY NEBRASKA COLLEAGUE IN THE SENATE, BEN NELSON. SENATOR NELSON SITS ON THE APPROPRIATIONS AND ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE SO IT WAS LOGICAL WE WOULD PARTNER ON NELSON WILL BE THE LEAD. I HAVE REMAINED INTRICATELY INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS.

LAST YEAR I AGAIN TOURED THE OMAHA VA WITH THEN SECRETARY PEAKE. AND AGAIN THE PROBLEMS THAT WERE INDICATED YEARS BEFORE WERE STILL

THERE OR HAD GOTTEN WORSE.

IT IS CLEAR TO ME THAT THE OMAHA VA IS GREAT AT PROVIDING CARE FOR OUR VETERANS. BUT THE FACILITY, BEING 59 YEARS OLD IS IN GREAT NEED OF REPLACEMENT. THE ROOMS ARE TOO SMALL, THE VENTILATION SYSTEM IS NOT UP TO CODE, THE HVAC SYSTEM NEEDS IMMEDIATE REPAIR AND THE PIPING AND SEWER SYSTEM IS SO OLD THAT REPAIRS JUST DON'T MAKE SENSE.

A NEW FACILITY IS CRITICAL TO THE FUTURE CARE OF THOSE WHO SO PROUDLY SERVED OUR COUNTRY. I REALLY BELIEVE THE NATURE OF THE BUILDING INHIBITS THE FURTHER GROWTH OF THAT EXACT SITE. I DO WANT TO COMMEND THE UNMC AND CREIGHTON DOCTORS AND STUDENTS WHO DO THEIR VERY BEST EVERY SINGLE DAY TO CARE FOR OUR VETS. YOUR WORK DOES NOT GO UNNOTICED AND I COMMEND YOU FOR IT.

THE VA AND CONGRESS MUST MAKE A CHOICE---A NEW BUILDING OR PARTNER WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR. MOST VETERANS I SPEAK WITH ARE IN FULL SUPPORT OF A NEW HOSPITAL. THERE IS HOWEVER SOME RESISTANCE TO ELIMINATING THE HOSPITAL ALL TOGETHER. IF A MERGER DOES OCCUR THE VA MUST RETAIN ITS IDENTITY.

BUILDING NEW OR COLLABORATING WITH AN EXISTING HOSPITAL HAS THE BUY IN FROM VETERANS IN OMAHA, WE ALSO HAVE BUY IN FROM THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY-SOME HAVE OFFERED TO BUILD THE NEW BUILDING AND LEASE IT BACK TO US. WE ALSO HAVE BUY IN FROM OUR CONGRESSMAN STEVE KING IN IOWA. WE ALSO HAVE 100 PERCENT SUPPORT FROM CONGRESSMAN'S JEFF FORTENBERRY AND ADRIAN SMITH. SO THE ENTIRE NEBRASKA DELEGATION SUPPORTS THIS IMPORTANT ENDEAVOR.

I WANT WHAT IS BEST FOR OUR VETERANS, SO IF THAT MEANS A NEW FACILITY OR IF IT MEANS COMBINING EFFORTS WITH AN EXISTING HOSPITAL I AM ON BOARD. AND I WOULD EVEN LIKE TO SEE THE OMAHA VA STRIVE TO BE ONE OF THE CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE.

THE MEN AND WOMEN SERVING OUR COUNTRY ARE MAKING TREMENDOUS SACRIFICES TO PROTECT OUR COUNTRY. I WOULD LIKE TO SAY THANK YOU TO ALL OUR VETERANS FOR THEIR SERVICE AND SACRIFICE. IT IS TIME FOR US TO DO THE RIGHT THING FOR OUR VETERANS, WE MUST HAVE A NEW FACILITY FOR HEALTHCARE IN OMAHA, WE CAN'T WAIT, WE MUST DO IT NOW.