

# NWI NEWS

VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System

*Link*

**MAY 2010**

## **GREETINGS FROM THE DIRECTOR**

President Barack Obama released his proposed Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 federal budget Feb. 1. This budget includes a proposal for \$56 million to design a major construction project (\$560 million) that provides a modern facility to serve Nebraska and western Iowa Veterans. This is truly exciting news for us and our Veterans. We are hopeful that this is another step toward providing lasting, world class health care to the Veterans of Nebraska and western Iowa.

When the current VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System (VA NWIHCS), Omaha was built 60 years ago, the nation was welcoming home the brave men and women who answered the call of duty and valiantly served in World War II. When they came home from the war in need of physical and mental health services, new facilities like VA NWIHCS, Omaha were built to meet their health care requirements as well as those of their fellow Veterans. Over the past 60 years, America saw its sons and daughters continue to serve at home and around the globe in peace and war. Through the years, VA facilities like Omaha added on, remodeled and made minor capital improvements to keep up the pace to meet the growing health care needs of Veterans.

Although the infrastructure of VA NWIHCS, Omaha is not currently adversely impacting patient safety or quality of care, the 1950's-era structure does not allow for expansion or modernization to provide innovative, technologically advanced and cutting-edge health care adaptation to meet the needs of today's Veterans.

The proposed funding is a concrete example of the administration's and VA's commitment to care for Veterans who have served their nation.

*Al Wasilko*

## **VA NWIHCS, OMAHA HAD HUMBLE BEGINNINGS**

The site of the existing VA NWIHCS, Omaha facility was once one of the highest land areas in Omaha. The grounds were originally a city poor farm and later owned by Douglas County and leased to the Omaha Field Club.

The expected large increase in the number of Veterans following World War II led to the authorization and funding for a VA hospital in Omaha. The Omaha community raised more than \$30,000 to pay Field Club to cancel the lease on the grounds.

The contract for building the VA hospital was awarded on Feb. 2, 1948 with a construction cost of \$11 million. The equipment cost \$4 million.

The building was dedicated Dec. 3, 1950, and the first patient was admitted to the hospital Feb. 1, 1951.

The hospital was designed and constructed as a 500-bed general medical facility. The original building had 1,608 windows and the floor space was equal to more than four city blocks. In 1957, the facility had 446 beds with an average daily census of 402 patients.

The original intensive care unit opened in 1971. The research addition was completed in 1975. The ambulatory care addition was completed in 1987. A new intensive care unit was completed in 2007. This was followed by a renovated emergency department in 2008, and a new addition to accommodate a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) unit that opened in 2009.

## **FEASIBILITY STUDY HIGHLIGHTS NEEDS AT VA NWIHCS, OMAHA**

The existing infrastructure systems are for the most part, the original building service equipment. After 60 years, the electrical distribution system, the heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, and the piping systems are failing. The medical center also has a current space constraint, and an even greater projected space constraint for both inpatient and outpatient needs in the next 10 years. The overall facility is deficient of about 41 percent of additional space based on workload projections to 2018.

The aging infrastructure at VA NWIHCS, Omaha is not currently adversely impacting patient safety or quality of care. However, the 1950s-era structure does not allow for expansion or modernization to provide innovative, technologically advanced and cutting-edge health care adaptation to meet the needs of today's Veterans.

*(continued from front page)*

Our engineers work extremely hard to provide an environment that doesn't allow the aging issues to show, including carpeting, wall coverings, new tiles in the lobby, and other minor improvements. However, what's not always easily visible are deficiencies that cannot be fixed with renovations including outdated surgical facilities, significant space deficiencies, and utilities such as heating, ventilation and air conditioning that are constantly in need of repair.

Specific events occurred over the past two years that brought the deficiencies to light and led to where we are today.

Former VA Secretary James Peake visited VA NWIHCS, Omaha in June 2008 at the invitation of Sen. Ben Nelson (D-NE). The Secretary toured the facility to see the deficiencies first-hand and to meet with representatives from affiliate leadership at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Creighton University as well as several key community business leaders. Secretary Peake held a joint press conference with Sen. Nelson and Congressman Lee Terry (R-NE), offering a commitment to fully explore the issues.

VACO (VA Central Office) Office of Construction and Facilities Management (OCFM) commissioned a feasibility study to evaluate the infrastructure deficiencies and identify possible options to remediate. The study was completed in April 2009.

In June 2009, Sen. Mike Johanns (R-NE) and the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs questioned a VA OCFM representative about the status and recommendations for the study during a hearing. Sen. Nelson and the Senate Appropriations Committee also questioned VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki and OCFM representatives about the study.

In June 2009, the VA NWIHCS director and engineering chief met with OCFM and VA Chief of Staff (COS) officials in Washington D.C. to discuss the study. The VA COS and a nine-person VA OCFM technical team traveled to VA NWIHCS to meet with facility leaders and examine the infrastructure deficiencies presented in the study to provide recommendations to Secretary Shinseki.

In Aug. 2009, Sen. Johanns held a field hearing for the Senate Committee on VA at VA NWIHCS, Omaha to explore the issues surrounding the study and to talk to representatives from the affiliates, Veterans organizations, and the Omaha Chamber of Commerce.

## **PREFERRED DESIGN TEAM SELECTED**

The proposed and preferred option for the new facility would include construction of a new inpatient tower and surgical suite, to renovate the existing outpatient clinic area and to increase parking. The intent is to preserve recent capital improvements such as the intensive care unit and dental clinic. Performing on-site construction is the preferred option because it is the most timely, least disruptive and most cost-advantageous to our Veterans.

Through VA's advance-planning funding, we are in the early stages of contracting with architectural and engineering firms to help us with the initial design concept of the proposed project. A joint-venture contractor (Leo Daly/NBBJ) was selected March 26 as the preferred design team. The joint venture contractor now has the opportunity to negotiate with VA to be awarded as a contract to design the proposed replacement facility.

## **HIGH QUALITY HEALTH CARE IN A 21ST CENTURY ENVIRONMENT**

We have started to lay the groundwork to envision what a modern hospital should look like and how we can involve Veterans, staff and our stakeholders in the process.

Actual details of the final project will be worked out in the design process. However, we have begun developing methods we can use to capture the ideas from those directly or indirectly impacted by the new project or those with specific knowledge or insight into leading health care concepts. This includes both internal and external customers.

At the staff level, we have included opportunities at the Spring Employee Forums. Many of the ideas generated through the forums include suggestions which could be incorporated into design of a new facility. This summer, we will be hosting two separate structured sessions using Alegen's Design Accelerator, where we will have a facilitator guide us through the issues surrounding Veteran-Centered Care and then delve into more specific clinical issues. We expect a mix of front-line employees, managers, and supervisors from departments throughout the hospital to contribute. We also will develop design teams around functional departments.

Through our new and enhanced outreach efforts this year, we are hearing comments first-hand from Veterans who are providing us with feedback about their care. In many instances, their comments and questions have provided us with insight on how future services should be provided and how a new facility can help achieve those goals.

We are in the early stages of developing opportunities for current and future Veterans and stakeholders to provide us with their input with the intent of interjecting that input into all phases of the planning and design process.

NWI News Link is published monthly.  
VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System  
4101 Woolworth Avenue  
Omaha, NE 68105  
<http://vawww.visn23.med.va.gov/nwi/nwiindex.asp>

