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News Release

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VA Announces Changes for New Jersey Facilities

WASHINGTON – Evaluating the shift of the spinal cord injury center from East Orange to the Bronx and expanding inpatient and outpatient services by new construction are part of a comprehensive plan by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to modernize its nationwide system of health care facilities.

"These changes will provide greater access to care for veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. "By strengthening our network of outpatient clinics, we will bring a greater quality of care closer to where most of New Jersey's veterans live."

About 72,000 of New Jersey's 628,000 veterans were treated last year in VA's health care facilities, up from 65,700 in 2000. In 2003, VA spent \$1 billion in New Jersey, an increase from \$764 million three years before.

Secretary Principi noted that about 80 percent of the health care provided by VA is outpatient care. He said the plan would allow the department to provide more of the outpatient care veterans want and use, while building upon VA's expertise in providing highly specialized inpatient care.

The changes are part of a comprehensive plan called CARES, short for "Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services." The secretary's CARES report can be viewed in its entirety on VA's Web site at <http://www.va.gov/CARES>.

Briefly, the secretary's announcement included the following for New Jersey:

- Meet increased demand for inpatient and primary care outpatient and specialty outpatient care through new construction to expand in-house capability and by converting vacant space;

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- Contract for care where necessary to meet increases in demand for primary and specialty outpatient care; and
- Validate plans to move the spinal cord injury center from East Orange to the Bronx VA medical center.

CARES is a plan to modernize and improve VA's health care system. Among the elements of the Secretary's CARES decision are more than 150 new community based outpatient clinics, potential creation of four new - and expansion of five existing - spinal cord injury centers, two new blind rehabilitation centers, and expansions throughout VA's healthcare system that will enhance veterans' access to VA care.

In July 1999, a General Accounting Office study found that VA was diverting a million dollars a day – or \$3.6 billion during a decade – from veterans' health care to maintenance on unneeded or unused facilities. The average age of VA's more than 4,900 buildings is more than 50 years, and the need to reduce vacant space and unneeded buildings has been the focus of several reports by the General Accounting Office.

This approach to facility's management means the dollars once wasted on old and vacant buildings can be used to enhance services in the communities where health care is provided.

"CARES modernizes VA's 74-year old health care system," said Principi. "I want to emphasize that no veteran will lose health care as a result of CARES, nor will there be any gaps in their health care services."

The CARES plan was reviewed by an independent commission, which received more than 212,000 comments and held 81 site visits to VA and Department of Defense medical facilities, and State Veterans Homes, 38 public hearings and 10 formal meetings. The commission submitted its recommendations to Secretary Principi in mid-February.

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