

**Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee**

**LB 935**

**February 13, 2014**

**John Hilgert, Director  
Veterans' Home Division  
Department of Health and Human Services**

Good afternoon, Senator Avery and members of the Government, Military and Veterans Affairs Committee. My name is John Hilgert (J-O-H-N H-I-L-G-E-R-T), Director of the Veterans' Home Division of the Department of Health and Human Services. I am here to testify in opposition to LB 935.

In 2013, LB 198 authorized the Department of Health and Human Services to acquire land to serve as the site for a new veterans' home to be located in central Nebraska and appropriated funds to construct the new home. The bill also required the Department to report to the Legislature the process and criteria used to select a site for the new home and the final site selected. In addition, LB 194 also provided reporting requirements dealing with the process used to select this site, the evaluation criteria, and scoring methodology used to select the location of the new home.

We are grateful to the Nebraska Legislature for this direction and support in developing a new veterans' home. We have complied with the Legislature's direction and reporting requirements. A copy of the reports required by LB 198 and LB 194 are available on the Legislature's website.

From the very beginning, this has been about meeting the needs of Nebraska Veterans. The goal has been to build a new facility in central Nebraska that will do two essential things:

1. Meet current building codes and standards, including life safety and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility; and
2. Be designed to meet current best practices established by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for Community Living Centers, which places an emphasis on private rooms for the privacy and dignity of the veteran.

As you are aware from previous testimony, we did not set out to change the location of the current Veterans' Home. As state officials, however, we have a responsibility to be available to members of the public, including local officials, to discuss state business, and Kearney approached us with an interest. We believed the only way to move forward would be through an open and competitive process. On March 25, 2013, the mayors of Grand Island, Hastings, Holdrege, Kearney, Lexington and North Platte signed a letter in support of the funding for construction of a new veterans' home. The letter also states that the "cities within the coalition are prepared to compete and provide local incentives to ensure completion of the facility."

A site selection committee was created that brought together the expertise of five state agencies: the Department of Administrative Services who is responsible for state buildings and property, the Department of Labor, the Department of Economic Development, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and the Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Veterans' Homes. The representatives of the agencies were Carlos Castillos, Jr., Catherine Lang, and me.

The Department of Administrative Services developed a Central Nebraska Veterans' Home website, [www.CNVH.nebraska.gov](http://www.CNVH.nebraska.gov), that included all information specific to this project in an effort to be open and transparent.

Once the formal process started, all questions from the interested parties were directed to the Department of Administrative Services, the state agency responsible for managing bidding processes.

The formal process began April 29 when the Request for Statement and Offers (RSIO) was issued. It was followed with a Pre-Offer meeting on Friday, May 10, in Lincoln. A presentation was given at that time that included information about the background of the Veterans' Home, the needs assessment, the federal State Home Construction Grant Program and the USDVA process, an anticipated federal timeline, site selection information including geographic parameters and USDVA requirements, and the site selection process and criteria that would be used. This PowerPoint presentation was posted to the CNVH website so it could be accessed by anyone at any time.

The site selection criteria and scoring methodology, shared at the May 10 meeting, had nine primary categories, all with sub-category elements. The nine primary categories included:

1. Physical Factors
2. Utilities and Infrastructure Factors
3. Cultural Factors
4. Environmental Factors
5. Community Services
6. Regulatory Factors
7. Workforce Factors
8. Community Support Factors
9. Program Enhancements

The significant timeline dates include:

- April 29 – The State issues a Request for Statement and Offers (RSIO),
- May 10 – Pre-Offer Meeting for Central Nebraska Replacement Veterans' Home
- May 17 – Deadline for receipt of written questions and clarifications from interested parties,
- May 23 – State to publish responses to written questions and clarification,
- June 11 – Statement of interest and offers due from interested parties, and

- June 13 & 14 – Site visits by the site selection committee.

On July 12, Governor Heineman announced that while four outstanding communities submitted outstanding proposals, Kearney was chosen as the site of the new home. The proposals and all other information related to the selection process are available on the CNVH website for review.

In addition to the site selection process that was taking place, once state funds were appropriated we were able to begin the federal application process. In January we announced that the Central Nebraska Veterans' Home proposal was on the priority list, ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in a field of 62 priority 1 proposals.

When the day comes to move from the old facility to the new home we will be prepared. We have done this before. When we moved from Western Douglas County to Eastern Sarpy County, our members had breakfast at the old facility and lunch at their new home. We had moving buddies. Volunteers, who familiarized themselves with a member of the Thomas Fitzgerald home, became their friend. [process description] In short, we know how to do this.

I believe we have done our best to be open, transparent and objective in developing this project, and for the sake of Nebraska's veterans, it's essential to continue moving forward. The new Central Nebraska Veterans' Home will serve our veterans well and be a place that we can all be proud of, and for those reasons, I urge you to vote no to LB 935.