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LARRY CRAIG

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Dramatic Changes for Veterans by U.S. Senator Larry Craig

There is an old adage in the news business: "If it bleeds, it leads." People like drama, and editors know that exciting stories get readers to buy newspapers and viewers to tune in to the evening news. We want to know why planes crashed, why dams failed and why someone lied. We want to know why someone got hurt, when the bank was robbed and who is going to jail. The nation's movie theaters are filled with stories about killers, and book sellers know that thrillers get buyers into the stores.

Simply put, drama sells.

So with that in mind, I have some drama to share. It's about our nation's veterans and what has been happening in the past few years.

Back in the 1989, actor Tom Cruise appeared in the movie "Born on the 4th of July." In that film, he portrayed a Vietnam veteran who suffered horrible conditions and terrible treatment – not in a Vietnamese prisoner of war camp, but in a Veterans Affairs hospital. For many Americans, that is the image they have of VA facilities and treatment of our nation's veterans – rat infested swamps with employees who are either inept or just downright evil.

That movie was a stinging indictment about a health care system for veterans. They deserve better, and I'm happy to report that the world for veterans has changed for the better.

Dramatically so.

Today, veteran's health care and hospitals are making headlines because of their high quality. Washington Monthly, a left of center political magazine that circulates in our nation's capital city, last year carried a story about veterans medical care on the cover. Editors titled the story: "The Best Care Anywhere." Three months ago Business Week magazine ran a story about VA care with a similar title: "The Best Medical Care In The US." And last month Time magazine headlined one of their stories "How VA Hospitals Became The Best."

As Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I was very pleased to read those reports. It tells me that the efforts we have made in Congress over the past few years, particularly under the leadership of President Bush, have made a difference. In the previous Administration, the proposed budgets for veterans were cut twice and flat in a third year. In contrast, with enactment of the 2007 VA healthcare budget, spending will have increased by 70 percent under President Bush.

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In real dollars, overall spending on veterans will soon have risen from \$48 billion in 2001 to approximately \$80 billion next year. I am not generally a fan of spending more and more taxpayer money, but when it comes to veterans, I am an advocate for meeting their needs. Take, for example, the research VA is doing so that we can help those veterans who have been seriously injured.

A few months ago I had the opportunity to use an artificial hand that is under development by the researchers within the VA. Within a minute or so after electrodes were attached to my forearm, I was able to use the artificial hand to pick up a glass of water. In years gone by, such a feat would have taken weeks, if not months to achieve.

Even bigger changes will be coming in the next few years.

Right now VA researchers are working on developing artificial eyes to help the blind see, and prosthetic hands are under development to help amputees “feel” when they touch. Other researchers are working to enable amputees to move their limbs by thoughts alone. We truly live in a remarkable age.

Dramatic improvements for veterans have come in other areas, as well.

One of the most rewarding experiences of my political career was authoring and then seeing legislation passed which provides immediate payments of between \$25,000 and \$100,000 to service members who have been traumatically injured. My hope is that many of those young men and women will benefit from the other efforts currently underway to help “see” and “feel,” so that they can regain fuller lives.

This is not to imply that the whole system for veterans is perfect. It is not. But it is important to acknowledge the dramatic changes we have made on behalf of veterans and follow the admonition of the old hymn to “count your blessings, name them one by one.” It truly is surprising to see what has been done.