

POSTED: 6:10 pm CDT August 20, 2009

UPDATED: 6:35 pm CDT August 20, 2009

OMAHA, Neb. -- Sen. Mike Johanns said veterans need a new hospital in Omaha because the current 58-year-old building needs more than \$500 million in repairs

Johanns held a hearing at the Veterans Administration hospital at 42nd Street and Woolworth Avenue and said finding the money to replace the facility will be a challenge.

The hospital has peeling paint, crumbling pipes and overcrowded rooms.

"The VA facility offers quality health care because of the people," said Rep. Lee Terry. "It's inhibited because of the poor condition of the building."

The poor conditions were detailed in a report that was released on Monday.

"To make it efficient for 21st-century medicine would cost millions to the point where it's cheaper to build them a new building," said Terry. "Now we've got to convince the VA to do that."

Terry said he agrees with the report's suggested solution: a \$500 million plan with some renovation but mostly new construction.

"Anytime you go to build a hospital, you know that you're going to spend some money," Johanns said. "I would argue that this investment is a wise investment for our veterans."

Johanns praised the work of the medical center's staff.

"They're doing it in a facility that really is worn out," he said. "It was built a long time ago."

Panel members at the hearing, including Dr. Thomas Lynch, said the conditions haven't affected care yet.

"The concern, though, is how long we can continue to maintain it," Lynch said. "The other area is how long we can use and modify this space and still deliver state-of-the-art care."

The building is one of several across the country in need of an update. The VA will need to decide how much of a priority the Omaha facility is before funding and final plans can be discussed.

