

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary James Peake will visit Omaha to talk about the future of the city's VA Medical Center.

The Monday visit is the result of an invitation from Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., who wanted Peake to see the aging facility firsthand. It will be the first visit to the center by Peake, who has been on the job since December.

Nelson said the goal of the meeting is to ensure that Nebraska and western Iowa veterans continue receiving top-notch care.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb.; Mayor Mike Fahey; and representatives from other Omaha medical facilities will take part in the private discussions.

Terry said reports to his office indicate that the facility has been providing excellent care to patients but that there are concerns about the age of the building.

Local VA officials have been asking for hundreds of millions of dollars to either completely overhaul the building or construct a new facility. That request is still pending.

VA spokesman Will Ackerman said no announcements or decisions are planned for Monday. He said the get-together is simply aimed at sharing information and exploring the best approach to the situation.

"The real issue is, the building is 57 years old, and we want to find a solution for the long term," Ackerman said.

The talks will include an examination of the costs involved in renovating vs. replacing and the potential effect on patients. The group also plans to meet with community leaders.

Some upgrades to the building already have been completed or are under way.

The hospital's emergency room on the main floor is undergoing a renovation and the hope is to reopen it later this year. The facility also opened a new intensive care unit last year.



