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Bill Seeks Better Military Health Care

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The 2009 defense authorization bill that emerged from a House committee late Wednesday would halt construction of replacement hospitals for Walter Reed Army Medical Center until the Defense Department demonstrates that it can deliver world-class health services.

Language inserted in the bill would prohibit construction from going beyond the foundation stage until lawmakers are satisfied with the design of a new hospital at Fort Belvoir in Fairfax County and expansion of the National Naval Medical CenterBethesda. The bill is expected to reach the House floor in the next week. in

The measure came as a surprise to some lawmakers who, after revelations about substandard medical care at Walter Reed, believe both facilities should be built as quickly as possible. Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.), whose concerns led to the change in the bill, said that ensuring proper medical care is the purpose of the provision.

Murtha's concerns include his view that there has been insufficient oversight of the design of the new hospitals, as well as the fact that estimated costs for the expansion in Bethesda, which will be renamed Walter Reed, have increased to \$940 million today from \$201 million in May 2005.

Closing Walter Reed was part of base-realignment legislation approved in 2005. The urgency intensified last year after reports in The Washington Post revealed rampant substandard care for veterans at the aging hospital.

The plan calls for most war-wounded veterans to be treated at the larger Walter Reed in Bethesda, while the new hospital at Fort Belvoir would treat retired and active-duty members of the military. Fort Belvoir would also provide some care for the war-wounded.

Construction on the Fort Belvoir hospital has begun, and the new authorization language could cause delays.

Concerns about design and cost overruns, meanwhile, apply primarily to the Bethesda facility, which is why Rep. James P. Moran Jr. (R-Va.) said he will seek to alter the language so it no longer applies to Fort Belvoir.

Murtha has said he opposes closing Walter Reed, raising concerns yesterday that the new language is somehow intended to derail the new facilities. Rep. Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), chairman of the House Committee of Armed Services, said in a statement that is not the case.

"Our goal is not to overturn the BRAC Commission's decision and keep Walter Reed open, but rather to make certain the successor to Walter Reed provides the best medical care possible to our wounded warriors," he said.