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## Joint military hospital to be built

NEWS SUN STAFF REPORT

**NORTH CHICAGO** — A new \$170 million "joint Navy-Veterans Affairs hospital" will be built in five years to serve veterans, active duty military personnel, active duty dependents and military retirees, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, said Monday.

Kirk was at the North Chicago VA Medical Center Monday morning to announce the move of the mental health outpatient facility from the Navy Hospital at Great Lakes Naval Training Center to the VA hospital, about a mile away.

"The integration of our Navy and VA hospitals will offer better care for active

duty and veterans alike," he said. "By moving the Navy into our VA, our veterans hospital will never close. This will ensure veterans health care in northern Illinois far into the future."

A 1999 VA study recommended that the North Chicago hospital be shut down and maintained only as an outpatient clinic.

Kirk and others argued that the Navy and VA should share medical facilities and resources in North Chicago.

The VA announced last year, after another study and after nearly two years of protests, that the closing proposal was being dropped and that the North Chicago VA Medical Center would remain open.

Other VA hospitals around the country have been closed, Kirk noted. "This integration project kept the North Chicago VA open," he said.

An estimated 50,000 veterans live in Lake County and the number is expected to grow to 55,000 by 2010, Kirk said.

The Navy is in the middle of a \$1 billion expansion project at Great Lakes and part of the expansion will be construction of a new Navy Ambulatory Care Center to be located next to the existing VA hospital in North Chicago, Kirk said.

"Navy-VA cooperation will become a model for excellent health care at reduced taxpayer expense," he predicted.

"Integration between the Navy and VA will ensure the survival of veterans health care in northern Illinois while upgrading the care received by our Navy recruits."

A task force convened by President George W. Bush recommended last spring that the VA and Department of Defense should increase cooperation in health care across the country, Kirk said.

With Kirk at the VA Monday were Adm. Ann Rondeau, Great Lakes commander, Navy Capt. Michael Anderson, commanding officer of the Great Lakes Naval Hospital, and Patrick Sullivan, director of the North Chicago VA Medical Center.