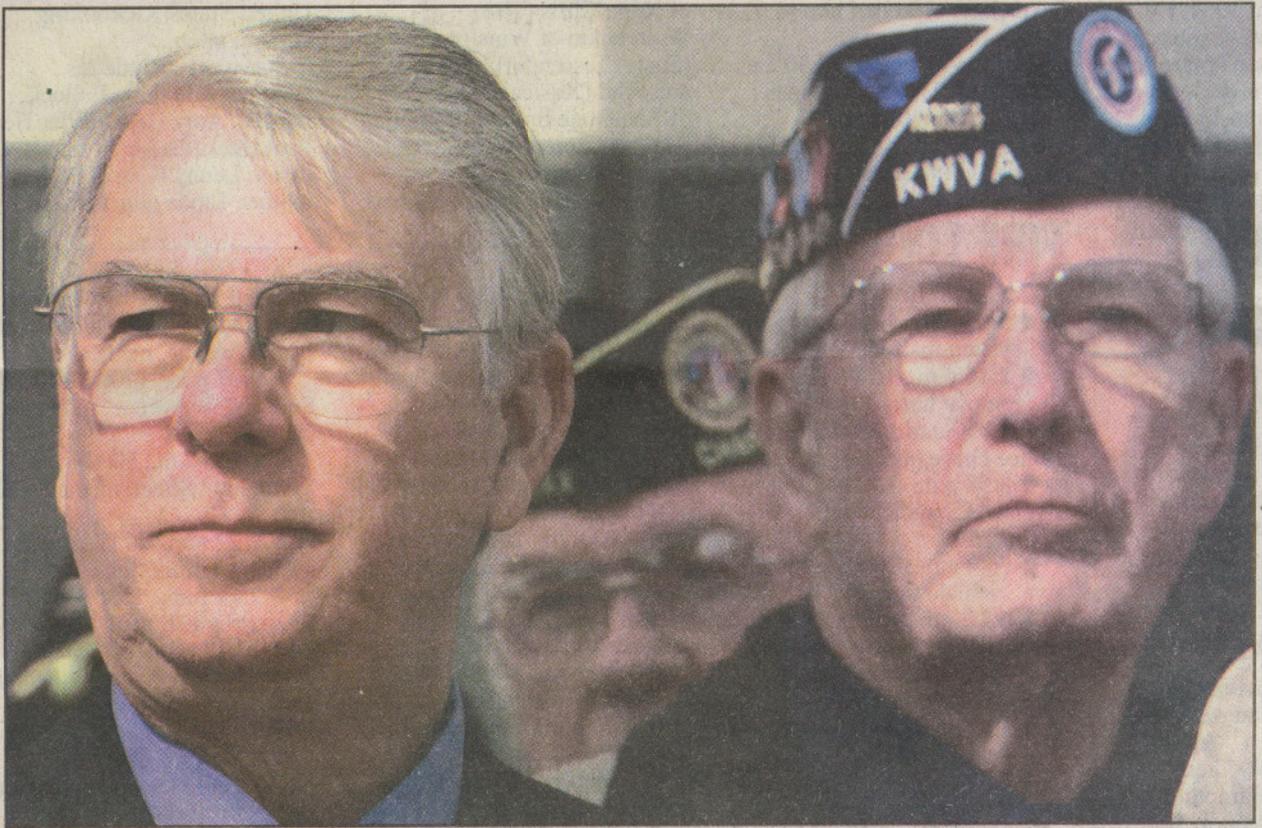


'The least we could do'



KEVIN E. SCHMIDT / THE JOURNAL-STANDARD

Korean War veteran Henry Winter, right, and dozens of other area vets listen as Congressman Don Manzullo, left, announced the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs has agreed to open a community health clinic for military veterans in Freeport next summer. The announcement was made at a press conference held outside the Stephenson County Courthouse on Monday.

Freeport VA office will provide routine medical care, keep vets from driving to Madison, Rockford

BY NATHAN LEGUE
The Journal-Standard

FREEPORT — Normally, local World War II veteran Virg Bowers travels to Rockford for his annual checkups at the Veteran's Administration's health clinic there. But by next year, he'll be able to get them done right here in Freeport.

Local veterans will get their own local clinic by next summer to get routine checkups, doctor visits and outpatient follow-ups, Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan, announced Monday — a move expected to eliminate the need for many of the 17,000 trips to Madison or Rockford

made by area veterans last year.

"I think this is the greatest thing that could've happened to us," said the 77-year-old Bowers.

Before a crowd of soldiers from World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and other eras at the Stephenson County Courthouse, Manzullo and other officials outlined plans to open the clinic by June 2004.

For aging vets in northwest Illinois who use the Department of Veterans Affairs' health care services, a trip to the doctor can be a long haul. The William S. Middleton Memorial VA Medical Center in Madison is an hour's drive away and the closest satellite clinic is in Rockford.

A local consortium of veterans groups stepped in to fill the gap, giving rides to Madison five days a week in a van leased through contributions from the VA and local donors. Since 1995, Allied Veterans' vans have transported 7,600 vets to Madison and logged 211,000 miles on the road, said David Groves, Freeport's veteran services officer.

Korean War veteran Henry Winter volunteers twice a month to drive the van from Freeport to Madison. For volunteers and aging veterans, the local clinic will ease the burden.

"We needed it for a long time," Winter said.

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VETERANS —

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Bowers, a U.S. Navy Seabee who worked construction in the Marshall Islands during and after World War II, travels to Rockford for his annual checkup and blood work. Last year, veterans from Stephenson, Ogle and Jo Daviess counties visited the Madison VA hospital and Rockford clinic 17,000 times, said John Rohrer, VA managed care director.

A Freeport clinic has been discussed since 2001, but money already approved for the project was frozen by the VA. The Freeport site was one of only 24 proposed spots nationwide that got a second look and a second approval, Rohrer said.

Opening the clinic will cost the VA about \$300,000, Rohrer said. The VA will advertise for bids to find a space in Freeport between 2,500 and 3,000 square-feet this week or next, Rohrer said.

"The price for this clinic was paid years ago by the people you see here," Manzullo said during the press conference. "This is the least we could do for the people who have fought the battles for the freedom we enjoy."

The satellite clinic will provide routine medical procedures like physicals and taking blood samples, but veterans who need inpatient care and more specialized procedures will still have to travel to Madison.

More than 5,000 veterans live in Stephenson County, 13.8 percent of the population over 18 years old, according to U.S. Census figures. There are almost 15,000 veterans in Stephenson, Jo Daviess, Carroll and Ogle counties.