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# Keeping Promises Made to Military Veterans

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The Health of Our  
Military Veterans is  
Important

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VA SNF Special Interest Group,  
Casper, Wyoming

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## **Meeting Veterans' Needs in the Heart of Wyoming - The Case for Casper as the Location of Choice!**

### **Abstract**

Wyoming is the only state without a skilled nursing facility for the long-term care of military veterans, a benefit to which our veterans are entitled. Casper is the ideal location for all Wyoming residents due to its centralized location, primary medical care facilities, ease of access for all transportation avenues, and accommodations for out of town families to visit and enjoy quality time with their loved ones.

### **Introduction**

During the 2018 budget session, the Wyoming Legislature recognized the absence of a veteran's skilled nursing facility in Wyoming. The Legislature appropriated funds for Level I and Level II studies that, among other things, will determine the need for a skilled nursing facility and make recommendations for locating the facility. Natrona County's members of the State Legislature all support Casper as the location of the new facility. They will be fervent participants in future legislative actions to authorize the facility and provide funding. Please note that this will be a facility under the jurisdiction of the Wyoming Department of Health with significant funding from the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs.

### **Opportunity Statement**

A Casper Coalition including business, government and volunteers has proposed that the skilled nursing facility be located in this central Wyoming community. Casper offers some excellent locations that complement the mission of a skilled nursing facility. These include the use of historic WWII buildings on the Casper/Natrona County International Airport and alternatively, a second property in central Casper close to Wyoming Medical Center and other important services that are helpful to a facility of this nature. Both properties are available as an in-kind donation to the state for the skilled nursing facility.

### **Proposed Value Proposition**

Wyoming veterans often go without long-term care or have to relocate to a distant community to receive their veteran benefits. Casper is an ideal and central location for serving veterans' needs in the state. Not only is the city a regional population hub for central Wyoming, but it offers a wide array of services and support networks important to veterans and their families no matter their stage in life. Casper is a regional destination for medical, financial and educational services and serves as a central point for energy, construction, and mining activity in the region. The city has become Wyoming's meeting place and destination for entertainment and shopping and offers the only international airport in Wyoming.

The following outlines the key features and benefits of locating a skilled nursing facility in Casper which include: land, workforce, medical care, and general overall infrastructure important to the operations of the facility.

1. Geography: Casper is located in the heart of Wyoming and serves as a central hub and destination for central Wyoming residents. Access is available with one interstate and two major

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highways. The city is within a short drive to Riverton/Lander, Sheridan, Gillette, Douglas, Cheyenne, and Rawlins.

2. Quality of Life: The North Platte River and Casper Mountain offer significant outdoor recreation options, which can also serve as healing opportunities. More and more research is showing a strong connection to mental and physical healing through encounters with nature. A vibrant downtown, shopping, entertainment and meeting space attract visitors from across Wyoming as well as traveling tourists to Yellowstone National Park. Churches, community centers, a library and city-owned amenities are plentiful and many quality of life choices exist for residents. Casper has a strong veteran population and regularly hosts community events to engage veterans and their families in showing them appreciation, engaging all generations in patriotism, and offering information to access resources and services.
3. Community: With a population of approximately 55,000 residents, Casper is known for its charitable contributions and support of nonprofit missions in the community. As of 2015, Natrona County was home to over 500 public charities, foundations and other entities that spend nearly \$500 million annually (Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics).
4. Transportation: Casper is home to Wyoming's only international airport and foreign trade zone. The Casper/Natrona County International Airport provides daily commercial flights on United and Delta with connectivity through Denver and Salt Lake City from points around the United States as well as internationally. For those who may be traveling by private aircraft, the Airport offers all amenities for general aviation aircraft (tie-down, fuel, aircraft hangars, etc.) and, as the only international airport in Wyoming, can clear any passengers traveling to Casper from outside of the United States. The Airport is home to Air Methods air ambulance services covering all of central Wyoming and transporting patients to out of state medical centers. Regional bus service is provided by Powder River/Coach USA. City services include the Casper Area Transportation Coalition (CATC) serving local transportation needs with a fixed route bus system, and a Dial-a-Ride/reservation shuttle service, for a minimal cost. Three taxi services are available along with Uber and Lyft. Private air charter service is also available.
5. Education and Workforce Development: The Casper workforce consists of over 38,000 individuals across all major sectors and industries. Higher education in Casper is unsurpassed with both Casper College and the University of Wyoming – Casper offering certificates, undergraduate and graduate degrees and continuing education programs. College and professional programs are aligned with workforce needs that have proven effective in meeting the burgeoning need for healthcare professionals in Casper. Two new hospitals have been built in the last ten years in Casper in addition to the strong growth in specialty and tertiary care at Wyoming Medical Center. Higher education offerings related to healthcare include a Masters in Counseling Education, various CNA nursing training programs, an Associate Degree of Nursing, Bachelors of Social Work and other healthcare training programs (e.g., radiography, respiratory therapy, occupational therapy, occupational therapy assistant, pharmacy technician and emergency medical services/paramedic). A new surgical tech program is in the process of being created through a community partnership that identified a need for this program and is an example of the flexibility and responsiveness of workforce training programs.

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6. Healthcare Services and Support Networks: A skilled nursing facility requires a complex network of healthcare services and providers that are only found in large population centers. Casper is home to three hospitals and other health facilities offering over 75 different medical specialties including important primary care, geriatrics, cardiology, neurology, nephrology, hospice, family practice residency program, physical/occupational/speech therapies, and mental health services. Support networks exist across a wide array of medical specialty interests important to aging populations such as Alzheimer's, dementia, brain injury, transportation, mental health, wound care, diabetic education, wellness, and much more. Healthcare services are vast, but specific to skilled nursing facilities. Casper is home to compounding pharmacies, IV practitioners who deliver medication and providers who sell oxygen supplies that serve a regional and national network of clients.
7. Emergency Services: Casper is situated in one of the least risky locations in the country for natural disasters. If something should happen, the Natrona County Emergency Management Administration is capable of organizing large-scale preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation and security measures to protect its citizens. Wyoming Medical Center offers Level II trauma support for central Wyoming with all major medical flight services available through its regional dispatch center and air ambulance services to out of state medical facilities.
8. Hospice Services: Nursing home residents in the final phase of their lives have intense and different needs than others. Casper is the home of the largest hospice program offering end-of-life care in the state of Wyoming. Central Wyoming Hospice regularly provides outpatient palliative care services in skilled nursing facilities and operates an 18-bed inpatient facility for those with acute symptoms. Last year, 79 veterans received hospice care in Casper. Additionally, CWHP participates in the *We Honor Veterans Program*.
9. Veterans Services: Veteran services located in the Casper area include the United States (U.S.) Veterans Employment Services, Wyoming Veterans' Commission, U.S. Veterans Affairs Department, and Oregon Trail Veterans Cemetery. The Veterans Administration operates a community-based outpatient clinic and Veteran Center in Casper. Community veteran's organizations include two Veterans of Foreign Wars locations, an American Legion post, two veterans clubs, a college based student veteran club, Veteran Service Officers, a Disabled American Veterans office, and Volunteers of America. Casper College is designated as a Military Friendly School, Yellow Ribbon Program School and designated Peer Advisers for Veteran Education (PAVE). The Wyoming Veterans Museum is located on the Casper/Natrona County International Airport.
10. Land: There are two ideal options to locate a skilled nursing facility within the Casper area. Each property is served by all major utilities and is located within the boundaries of Casper. Both properties are available for donation to the State for the skilled nursing facility.
  - a. Property #1: Located on the airport and part of the historic World War II Casper Army Air base is approximately 25.57 acres. This area offers in-place infrastructure such as roads and utilities including high-speed internet, long term low cost lease, and low development costs. It also offers existing buildings that can be repurposed into a greenhouse style skilled nursing facility with room for future expansion and other amenities such as an extended stay hotel.

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- b. **Property #2:** Approximately 3 acres owned by the City of Casper, located in a central Casper residential neighborhood, adjacent to a fire station, school, and within a mile of Wyoming Medical Center, Senior Center, Recreation Center, and neighborhood shopping. This parcel appraised for \$1,185,000 in September 2015, and previously for \$1,120,000 in January 2013.
11. **Building and Construction:** Casper and its surrounding municipalities follow the Uniform Building Code and hold a proven track record in working with the Wyoming Department of Health, Healthcare Licensing and Surveys to inspect and license healthcare facilities to Life Safety codes. The City of Casper's Building Division partners in the oversight of all construction projects to ensure they are constructed to plan, and communicates regularly with all parties involved. Architectural firms located in Casper, as well as contractors, have wide and varied experience in planning and building healthcare facilities.
12. **Utility Infrastructure:** Casper has undergone significant investment and improvement of its utilities to protect and serve residents in the area to the highest degree. Rocky Mountain Power serves the area's needs for electricity and in 2014 completed work on a redundant electrical network that connects substations throughout the Casper area to support each other in the event of an outage. As a regional hub and location for fiber optic infrastructure, Casper offers access and redundancy by connecting major cross-continental arteries along I-25, I-90 and I-80. The Central Wyoming Regional Water System (CWRWS) supplies potable water that meets all drinking water standards. The CWRWS water treatment plant and transmission mains can accommodate the water demand created by the Veterans Skilled Nursing Facility. The Regional Wastewater System (RWWS) including the interceptor sewers and wastewater treatment plant have the capacity to handle the waste stream as well. Additionally, the RWWS maintains a US Environmental Protection Agency approved industrial pretreatment program to ensure regulatory compliance of all discharges to the publicly owned treatment works. The Casper Solid Waste Facility is permitted to handle and dispose of bio-medical waste and hazardous waste.

### **Solution Details**

Central Wyoming veterans and their families need access to skilled nursing facilities that do not require expensive travel and lodging for families. Casper offers a transportation network that serves people within a few hundred miles of the city. Casper is the largest, most centrally located city in the State with access to extended stay hotels, restaurants, public transportation, an international airport, and public trails. Casper is one of the largest volunteer-involved cities in the nation.

The Cheyenne community has easy access to Colorado, which may have additional medical options available along the Front Range. Sheridan, Buffalo, and Cody are fairly isolated in their access to regional services, and they have a smaller population base that may struggle to meet workforce demands. With their proximity to Montana, these residents may choose to utilize medical and long-term care options available out of state. Gillette and Newcastle are also fairly isolated in their access to regional services, and also have smaller populations that may also struggle to meet workforce demands. With their proximity to South Dakota, Gillette, Newcastle, and northeast residents may choose to utilize medical

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and long-term options available in South Dakota. Therefore, it would be ideal to have a skilled nursing facility centrally-located in Casper.

### Business Benefits

With Casper’s central location, families in Wyoming visiting residents have a shorter distance to travel to visit their loved ones than if they were required to travel across the entire state.

Casper to:	Cody	214 miles	3 hours 26 minutes
	Cheyenne	178 miles	2 hours 32 minutes
	Douglas	50 miles	48 minutes
	Gillette	125 miles	2 hours 2 minutes
	Jackson	279 miles	4 hours 37 minutes
	Laramie	148 miles	2 hours 24 minutes
	Riverton	120 miles	1 hour 54 minutes
	Rock Springs	224 miles	3 hours 25 minutes
	Sheridan	149 miles	2 hours 8 minutes

For families visiting from outside of Wyoming, Casper is easily accessible by Interstate 25 from the north and south, highway 20/26 from the west, and 220 from the southwest.

For those staying overnight, or for longer stays, the Casper area has 2,700 hotel rooms and greater room availability at the lowest rates compared to similar cities in the region. Plus, as the regional retail hub in Wyoming, there is plenty of shopping, restaurants, leisure, and recreational activities for downtime.

Family members who can travel to Casper quicker, easier, and who can stay less expensively translates into more, and/or longer visits, something that is tremendously beneficial to both family members and veterans alike, and that is priceless.

### Conclusion

Having addressed, at a high level, the points above, Casper is prepared to meet the challenge of constructing and supporting a veteran’s skilled nursing facility. With nearly 15,000 veterans and Gold Star Families located in and from surrounding areas that identify with Casper, the city is keenly positioned to address the growing needs for skilled nursing for veterans that is projected to increase for the foreseeable future. Casper offers a very supportive legislative base and solidarity between public

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and private relationships. These partnerships combine the strengths and resources of each sector to successfully complete projects. Creative alliances define Casper's political will.

Constructing the veteran skilled nursing facility in a location other than Casper will cause unjustifiable stress to veterans and their family members. No other populous city in Wyoming is as centrally located and smaller cities do not offer the amenities of Casper which delivers the finest quality and quantity of time families can spend with their loved one.

### **Call to Action**

All Wyoming State Legislators and involved state agencies should recognize that while other communities propose specialized events, primary medical care, limited accommodations and partial recreational activities, Casper offers a larger scale of all amenities resulting in a better quality of life for skilled nursing facility residents. The current plan for a 24-bed facility should be the initial step toward building a facility that will handle at least 50 patients as the current needs analysis shows that the 24-bed facility will be full prior to construction completion. Casper is the only site that can meet the broad needs of a facility of this nature, while filling a service void the majority of Wyoming veterans struggle to find adequate solutions for now. The sites and partnerships are ready to deploy now to meet veterans' needs in the heart of Wyoming.