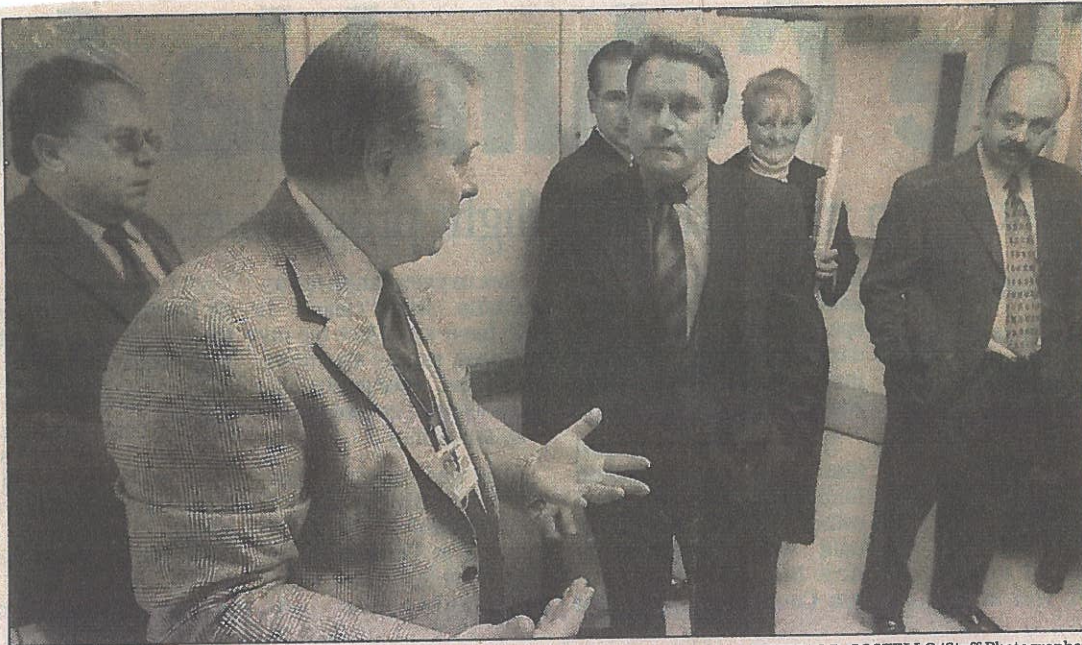




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THOMAS P. COSTELLO/Staff Photographer

Veterans Affairs official Bob Byrnes (left) explains plans to turn Patterson Army Health Clinic into an outpatient clinic to Rep. Christopher H. Smith, R-N.J. (center).

Empty rooms to become vets' outpatient clinic

Rep. Smith takes tour of Fort Monmouth facility scheduled to open in May.

By **SAMUEL P. NITZ**
STAFF WRITER

EATONTOWN — Rep. Christopher H. Smith, R-N.J., explored a barren, third-floor wing of the Patterson Army Health Clinic at Fort Monmouth yesterday, viewing the empty rooms and silent hallways that are to become the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' first outpatient clinic in Monmouth County.

Bob Byrnes, the VA's chief of

nothing more than carpet, walls and sunlight.

There is still work to be done, Smith said, but before long, thousands of Shore-area veterans will enjoy better, faster health care.

"This is a great day for veterans of Monmouth and Ocean counties," Smith said.

Smith, who chairs the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, has been pushing for a new clinic for two years, in part to ease demand for services at the James J. Howard Outpatient Clinic in Brick.

The Brick clinic struggles to handle some 50,000 patient visits per year, more than twice its original load, and waiting times

medical care, mental health, nutritional and social work services on an estimated \$1.7 million annual operating budget, after startup costs of roughly \$250,000, Smith said.

The health care needs of Shore-area veterans are substantial, driven in part by sheer numbers, VA officials said.

There are roughly 118,000 veterans in Monmouth and Ocean counties, with veterans making up 16 percent of the population in Ocean and 12 percent in Monmouth, according to the U.S. Census.

Ken Mizrach, chief executive officer of the VA's New Jersey system, was visibly excited about