



A five-day shutdown of Northport VA hospital's surgical units, like one shown here in 2016, was caused by air-conditioner motor failure.

JOHNNY MILANO

Surgeries halted at VA

Broken AC unit is latest problem at aging facility

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The Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center at Northport was again forced to suspend surgeries last week, when a failing air conditioner motor required the hospital to close all five of its operating rooms, a VA official said.

The hospital's five-bed surgical suite, which is served by a stand-alone air-conditioning system apart from the building's main cooling operation, was shut down Feb. 24 after maintenance workers noticed that a motor was failing, according to Northport VA spokesman Todd Goodman. Northport's operating rooms

remained offline until Tuesday, when work and testing on the \$58,000 repair was completed. In all, 18 patient surgeries had to be rescheduled, Goodman said.

The system shutdown is the latest malady to strike aging infrastructure at the 91-year-old medical center, whose main hospital building was erected during the Vietnam War. It comes at a time when Congress has expressed growing unease over maintenance costs associated with keeping the nation's 170 VA medical centers and 1,063 outpatient sites operational.

Two years ago, Northport halted surgeries for nearly four months when a failure of the same air-conditioning system sent metal fragments spewing from vents into the hospital's operating rooms, threatening to contaminate patients with open wounds. The surgical suite remained closed from February

2016 until that June, after the medical center designed and installed custom-made air filters to trap the particles.

A year earlier, piping connecting four cooling towers atop the medical center's 46-year-old main hospital building ruptured. That forced Northport to rent costly portable chillers until a \$12 million replacement could be completed, using a helicopter to hoist the new cooling equipment to the hospital's roof.

In January, Northport was forced to close its 42-bed veterans homeless shelter after a heating, ventilation and air conditioning system failed just after the record cold stretch in mid-January. Repairs are not scheduled for completion until mid-August, at a cost of \$1.1 million.

VA employees assigned to the shelter building reportedly had complained for weeks of having to work in winter coats

and use space heaters before the decision was made to close the building and relocate the shelter's residents to nonprofit facilities elsewhere on Long Island.

The medical center's continuing maintenance problems threaten what is widely considered a valued facility among Long Island's estimated 130,000 veterans, many of whom need care for war wounds, combat-related psychological stress or geriatric maladies.

Last year, Northport VA's director, Scott Guermonprez, replaced the medical center's director of engineering during a departmental shake-up, and expressed frustration that the department had been slow to address maintenance problems.

The center — including original buildings erected in 1927 — treats about 30,000 individuals per year, according to Northport officials.

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CORRECTION

The secretary of the interior is Ryan Zinke. His first name was incorrect in a story Saturday.

THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1681 England's King Charles II granted a charter to William Penn for an area of land in North America that later became Pennsylvania.
1791 Vermont became the 14th state.

1793 George Washington was sworn in for a second term as president of the United States during a ceremony in Philadelphia.

1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as America's 32nd president.

1943 "Mrs. Miniver" won six Academy Awards, including best picture and best actress for Greer Garson (whose 5 1/2-minute acceptance speech became the butt of industry jokes). James Cagney won best actor for "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

1977 Some 1,500 people were killed in an earthquake that shook southern and eastern Europe.

2008 Republican John McCain clinched his party's presidential nomination, surpassing the requisite 1,191 GOP delegates as voters in Ohio, Vermont, Rhode Island and Texas put him over the threshold.

Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre retired after 17 years, saying he was "tired." (Favre later made a comeback with the Jets, then the Minnesota Vikings, before retiring again.)