

WASHINGTON – U.S. Reps. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., Jerry Costello, D-Ill., Ed Whitfield R-Ky., and John Shimkus, R-Ill., today introduced the Veterans' Health Care Quality Improvement Act in the House.

The bill seeks to improve the hiring process for physicians and implement other quality controls at Department of Veterans' Affairs medical facilities. Medical malpractice concerns are currently being investigated at the Marion, Illinois VA Medical Center after an increase of deaths at its surgical unit.

The bill mandates that doctors applying for VA positions disclose all previous medical malpractice allegations, disciplinary actions and payments. In addition, the VA would appoint a "National Quality Assurance Officer" to carry out the quality assurance program nationally, and such officers would be appointed regionally and at all VA medical facilities to monitor the provision of care. The legislation also makes loan repayment, tuition reimbursement and other incentives available to recruit doctors for hard to fill positions. U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Barack Obama, D-Ill., have introduced the bill in the Senate.

"We have a long way to go to make sure our veterans get the care they have earned and deserve," said Mitchell. "I am proud of this bipartisan effort that makes an important and significant step to improve the quality of health care our veterans receive."

"VA medical employees are a dedicated group and on the whole do a great job providing care to our veterans," said Costello. "However, the incidents and ongoing investigation at Marion show that the hiring process for doctors needs to be tightened, with more information about a doctor's work history made available. We have to be certain that each potential hire is thoroughly screened and that VA officials are aware of past performance issues. Our veterans deserve nothing less."

"Veterans deserve the best medical care available, and that means good doctors with a history of performing excellent service," said Whitfield. "Unfortunately, in order for us to ensure veterans are receiving quality care from competent doctors, this legislation has become necessary."

"Our veterans have given of themselves to our country, particularly those who are utilizing the VA health system. There should not be an added concern about the quality of care at VA medical centers, and I support establishing this quality assurance program," stated Shimkus.