

[The Arizona Republic](#)

*Editor's Note: U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D- Ariz., recently visited Walter Reed Army Medical Center and is co-sponsoring a bill that seeks to improve facilities and services related to the care for wounded and recovering service members at military hospitals. He is chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Mitchell responded to questions e-mailed by editorial writer Richard de Uriarte.*

**What did you learn on your visit to wounded service members at Walter Reed Medical Center?**

While we have all heard of the dilapidated conditions at Building 18, it is also important to remember how far across the Walter Reed campus those in outpatient care had to travel to make their doctors' appointments and to eat meals. It's a large, hilly complex and it can be very difficult for those in wheelchairs and crutches to navigate. I also got the sense that even though many of our wounded soldiers are receiving world-class medical care, the conditions at Building 18 affect the morale of everyone in the Army medical care system.

**What is your reaction to the resignations of top Army officials in the wake of Walter Reed?**

It's a first step, but the problems at Walter Reed and many other institutions are larger than one or two people. What we see is the result of a systematic failure and years of neglect, and it's unacceptable. We have a responsibility to continue to see that those who knew about these conditions and did nothing are held accountable, and do everything we can to ensure that something like this never happens again.

**What can Congress actually do to correct this, other than just hold hearings?**

We have to take action quickly so no more wounded soldiers experience these terrible kinds of conditions. Last week, I introduced the bipartisan Dignity for Wounded Veterans Act to put in place standards for military outpatient facilities and cut through the complicated bureaucracy and red tape many of our soldiers and their families experience every day. This is a good start, and I am hopeful Congress will take action very soon.

**Do you plan to tour Arizona facilities in the near future?**

Yes. I will be visiting veterans' facilities in the state over the next few weeks, and listening to the experiences Arizonans are having in the VA. It is important that we make sure our veterans are receiving the quality health care they deserve.

**What have we really learned from this scandal?**

I think we're all seeing firsthand how important it is to have oversight of what's happening at all levels of government, especially when it comes to caring for our wounded soldiers and veterans. We're uncovering problems that grew over the course of years because Congress didn't do a very good job of providing oversight. I'm hopeful that Republicans and Democrats can work together to ask the tough questions and make sure this kind of problem never happens again.

Earlier (last) week, the commanding general at Walter Reed said: "I don't do barracks checks." I think we're learning that's something we have to do - barracks checks to see that our troops and veterans receive the health care they have earned and deserve.