

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 23, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake, M.D.
Secretary of Veterans' Affairs
Department of Veterans' Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

Last week, the Department of Veterans' Affairs announced that its quality and safety efforts will be led by an official with a questionable track record of ensuring quality and safety at a VA medical care facility in Illinois. Dr. Peter Almenoff, who will serve as the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Quality and Safety, formerly directed the VA Heartland Network responsible for the Marion VA Medical Center. As you know, at least nine veterans died in 2007 because of surgical incompetence at the Marion facility. The VA reviewed the facility after the deaths and found easily identifiable problems at Marion. We are not aware of any efforts by the network to fix these problems in the months before the spike in mortality levels. Indeed, the Department's reviews identified certain deficiencies with the network led by Dr. Almenoff.

The role of the network in the failure of the Marion facility was never formally reviewed. Nor were network officials included in the Administrative Board of Investigation review. Instead, the VA has promoted the director, who should have been aware of the mismanagement at Marion -- mismanagement that led to the deaths of veterans who had every right to trust that they would receive quality medical care.

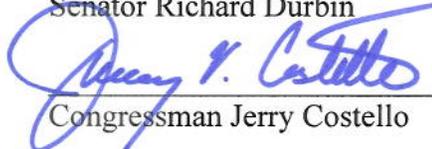
It is difficult to understand the decision to promote Dr. Almenoff. News of his promotion will be frustrating for the veterans who rely on the Marion medical center, particularly since quality and safety issues were at the forefront of the facility's troubles. It may also be of concern to veterans nationally, as Dr. Almenoff presumably will be responsible for quality and safety issues for the entire VA. You have promised to visit Marion and meet with concerned individuals there, and we are sure you will be asked during your visit about the decision to promote Dr. Almenoff.

We would appreciate an explanation for the decision to promote Dr. Almenoff and a full description of his new responsibilities, along with any information the VA may have about his efforts as director of the Heartland Network to ensure high-quality medical care at Marion.

Sincerely,



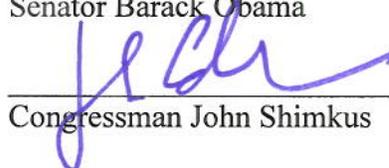
Senator Richard Durbin



Congressman Jerry Costello



Senator Barack Obama



Congressman John Shimkus