

Good news for veterans



KEVIN E. SCHMIDT / THE JOURNAL-STANDARD

Bernard Salafsky, Ph.D., dean of the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford announced that the college will start treating Veterans Affairs patients at a press conference Monday morning. Congressman Don Manzullo, right, helped facilitate the agreement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Great Lakes Health Care System after being alerted to situations that had veterans waiting up to 18 months to receive their first appointment.

Rockford entities collaborate on faster care

BY TRAVIS MORSE
The Journal-Standard

ROCKFORD — A new partnership between the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs may end up helping thousands of area veterans receive faster medical assistance.

At a special news conference Monday, VA and college officials announced that effective Dec. 9, U of I doctors will begin seeing veterans at the University of Illinois Family Health Center on East State Street in Rockford. This is expected to speed up the process for area veterans to sign up for the VA's prescription drug program, according to Congressman Don Manzullo, R-Egan, who helped facilitate the partnership.

Dave Groves, a veteran's service officer for the Freeport office of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, estimates that the initiative could end up benefiting around 2,000 veterans in the Stephenson, Jo Daviess and Carroll County areas who utilize the Rockford VA Clinic.

"It should help that many get in quicker," said Groves, a Vietnam-era veteran. "It will also help those veterans that need to be seen on a continuing basis."

Manzullo said the partnership will help eliminate a year-long backlog that developed at the Rockford VA Clinic after Congress passed legislation in 1996 expanding prescription drug benefits for veterans. Prior to that, only destitute veterans and those with war-related disabilities received benefits.

The backlog developed because the Rockford VA did not have the doctors available to provide timely physicals to area veterans who wanted to get into the VA's prescription drug program.

"This is the first program in the country that's aimed at the backlog," Manzullo said. "This partnership will specifically help all these waiting veterans become eligible. This is a very wise investment, not only because we're taking care of veterans which is our moral obligation, but in terms of the cost-effectiveness of it."

John Rohrer, VA managed care director, said more than 5,300 Rockford area veterans are currently served at the Rockford VA Clinic. With the addition of new staff and the new contract with U of I,

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Rohrer predicts the VA will be able to increase its capacity from 5,300 to more than 7,000. "We're excited about getting 500 veterans off the waiting list, to get their care started with the VA, through the university," Rohrer said. "It'll help us work toward our goal of getting veterans in for their primary care appointment within 30 days of application."

Veteran Darrell Gilgan, also the treasurer for the Rockford charter chapter of Vietnam, said in the recent past, some veterans have had to wait up to 18 months to receive their first appointment. This new arrangement should greatly improve the situation, he said.

"This is really a good thing," Gilgan said. "The big problem we have, all of our veterans, is the backlog in the system. ... It should speed up the entire process."

Issues dealing with the proper care of U.S. veterans will continue to remain of primary importance, Gilgan said.

"As long as you have a military, you will have veterans," Gilgan said. "The need doesn't go away."

Veterans who are eligible for treatment will be notified by the VA and may begin calling Nov. 11 for appointments. The phone number to call is (815) 972-1000.

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