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Op-Ed: Congress must protect America's health care workers

Dr. Larry Bucshon and Brian Tabor Special to the Courier & Press

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Congress has an opportunity to establish protections for our nation's health care professionals who are unfortunately facing violence at an alarming rate, particularly in hospitals.

Addressing this issue and establishing a safe environment is critical to ensuring quality care for patients. Fortunately, both the House of Representatives and the Senate are considering an initiative to do just that. The Safety from Violence for Healthcare Employees Act, or SAVE Act, is a common-sense, bipartisan proposal that will institute legal protections to deter violence inside our nation's hospitals, making these institutions more secure for employees as well as patients and their families.

In recent years, the health care sector has experienced a marked increase in workplace violence. While hospitals and health systems have robust protocols to detect and deter violence, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that health care workers are still five times more likely than any other type of employee to be assaulted on the job.

According to a 2022 analysis by Press Ganey, there were 57 incidents reported every day. The toll of such workplace violence is immense, as the physical and psychological harm contributes to burnout and exacerbates the current health care workforce shortage. Simply put, the status quo is not acceptable.

Indiana is one of nearly 40 states that have passed laws to increase penalties for those who commit attacks on health care workers. During the 2023 legislative session, the Indiana General Assembly enacted House Enrolled Act (HEA) 1021 which increases criminal penalties for assaults against hospital employees working in emergency departments.

The Indiana Hospital Association has also launched a multifaceted campaign called "Safe and Sound" which includes public education and training resources for its member facilities.

These are positive steps, but more action is needed. Currently, there is no federal law that affords broad protections from assault or intimidation across our health care system.

The SAVE Act would provide a higher, national standard by affording protections similar to those enjoyed by professionals in air transportation.

Surely, we can ensure that hospitals, as places of healing and community, are as safe as our airports. Health care heroes across the country deserve a workplace free from violence.

We pledge to work together to enact this legislation and look for other solutions to protect our doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals as they care for Hoosier patients.

Dr. Larry Bucshon is the congressman for Indiana's 8th District; Brian Tabor is president of the Indiana Hospital Association.