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Veterans Richard Lerner, left, and Jerry Cooper relax in the communal room at Fisher House in Seattle. (Joshua Trujillo / P-I)

Under the Needle: Veterans find lots of support at Fisher House

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By MIKE LEWIS
P-I REPORTER

Many start out the same way after arriving at Fisher House. Cubbyhole possessive. Walled into their own space, in their own worry. Conspicuously isolated in a communal home.

Then they meet someone such as Diane Lerner. Or Kathie Prather. People who in their daily lives run the meetings, staff the bake sales, remember everyone's birthday. People who see others' personal space the way developers eyeball an empty urban lot.

"They let me fold laundry when I'm really good," said Lerner, 65, drawing a laugh in Fisher House's spacious living room. "Or do dishes."

Added Prather, 60: "The other day I made a Mexican casserole that was a hit."

But neither woman is here for such tasks. Richard Lerner's rectal cancer brought Diane to Seattle from the Tri-Cities one month ago. Prather's husband, Rudy, needed vascular surgery, and so they came from Hayden, Idaho, last week.

The two men are Vietnam-era veterans and, as such, depend on the VA hospitals that serve those hurt in war or in service, or who have health issues long after discharge. Both families live near smaller veterans medical centers, but when medical problems became more serious or specialized, they left for Seattle.

The last time Prather came to Seattle for a hospital visit, she and Rudy stayed in a budget motel in Georgetown. The neighborhood made her nervous. The daily drive to the hospital, to do laundry, to find someplace to eat, was an exercise in getting lost.

Seattle is confusing, she said, "when you come from someplace smaller."

This was before Fisher House, which has done what hotels, maps and route familiarity cannot: It gives veterans' families a nice room right on the VA grounds and, better still, a ready-made community of people here for the same reasons.

"It's like a big support group," said Prather. Added Lerner: "It's the nicest community in Seattle."



 Joshua Trujillo / P-I

Fisher House opened in Seattle Sept. 10. Across the parking lot from the hospital, it has room for 21 families or about 60 people. As with other Fisher homes in the national network, the family members get a big room with one or two beds, robes, a bathroom, a computer and a television.

Staff does the residents' laundry but the families do their own cooking. Eating, watching the big-screen television and dining are communal. Residents get their own locking shelves for food and fridge space.

Diane Lerner looks over over food in the kitchen at Fisher House, where veterans receiving long-term care at Seattle's VA hospital and their families can stay.

We're in this together."

And while they might start out locking the shelves upon arrival, they seldom leave that way.

"People just leave stuff on the counter now," Lerner said. "Everyone pitches in. Everyone eats everyone else's stuff."

Prather cuts in. "Saturday night we had a pizza party."

In other words, they start to share. First food, then stories, support and friendship.

Rudy and Kathie will be leaving for home on Veterans Day. The Lerner's won't. Richard Lerner, 68, who served in the Navy from 1960 to 1966, said he and Diane are likely to be in the home past Thanksgiving.

The staff plans to honor the veterans and their families staying in Fisher House with a special dinner. And while the Lerner's would rather be home and cancer-free, Richard said that, given the circumstances, there is no place they'd rather be.

"This house," he said, "is one of the greatest things anybody has ever done."

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