


Fisher House offers military families a home away from home



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Story Published: Sep 10, 2008 at 9:53 PM PDT

Story Updated: Sep 10, 2008 at 11:34 PM PDT

By [Denise Whitaker & KOMO Staff](#)

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SEATTLE -- Dena Bennett's husband was shot in Iraq in 2005. A bullet took Staff Sgt. John Bennett's spleen, colon, a kidney and half of his pancreas.

To stay at his bedside at the VA Puget Sound Medical Center, Dena shuffled from motel room to motel room, some of which were less than desirable.

"And when we got up in the morning, there were dead bugs on the floor," she said.

For six months the family lived this way, jumping from motel to motel while John struggled in the hospital. And every year they repeat it when the family makes the trip from Montana to Seattle for John's annual checkup.

But long hospital stays for soldiers no longer mean an unsettled string of days for the Bennett family. The new Fisher House on the VA site, complete with 21 private suites, aims to serve as a home away from home for soldiers and their families during treatment. Military families can stay during treatment for free.

The house is built to help diffuse the stress of dealing with medical treatments. Each suit includes a manager who acts as a full-service concierge.

"His or her mission is to try to make every problem go away for that family, so that they only need to be concerned about medical care for their loved one," said Jim Weiskopf with the Fisher House Foundation.

The added support, the Bennetts say, just may have healing power of its own.

"Gives me goosebumps still. Makes me very emotional, too," said Dena. "I hope people understand just how much this place means to people like us."

"That takes a huge burden off of us and lets us concentrate on the healing process," John said. "That's a wonderful organization."

Unlike motels, those who stay at the Fisher House will be able to help each other cope with the challenges. This, Dena says, is key.

"You have all these emotions going through you and you break down and you have moments where you just cry all the time. And coming into a Fisher House, they all know what you're going through," she said.

"These young men and women deserve nothing but the best and we give it to them," Weiskopf said.