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Home for families to open near VA hospital

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P-I STAFF

The families of hospitalized veterans and troops at the VA medical center on Beacon Hill finally will have a home-away-from-home to be near their loved ones when Seattle opens its first Fisher House next week.

Formal dedication ceremonies are slated for Wednesday afternoon at the new 21-suite house on the grounds of the VA Center Puget Sound Health Care System.

But already three families with loved ones in veterans care are expected to move in by Monday, said Ken LeBlond, a spokesman for the Puget Sound VA health system.

One couple, John and Dena Bennett from Montana, are expected to speak at the dedication ceremonies. John, a Montana National Guardsman, was shot and wounded, and left a paraplegic in Iraq. They shared their struggles as a family while journeying to Seattle for treatment with the Seattle P-I in April 2006 in a story that helped galvanize support for building the new Fisher House.

Instead of having to find lodging and navigating other distractions while trying to focus on the care of loved ones, veterans families will be able to stay for free directly across the street from the medical center in the new Fisher House.

Seattle's will be the nation's 40th Fisher Houses, with other locations including Madigan Army Medical Center at Fort Lewis and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Fisher Houses are public-private partnerships built through public donations and major contributions from the Fisher family and the Fisher House Foundation. However, once open, VA assumes responsibility for all of the operating costs.

The Fisher House program was begun in 1990 by the late Zachary Fisher, and his wife, Elizabeth, of New York City, a real estate developer whose long-time philanthropy for various causes included a commitment to helping military and veterans' families. Before his death in 1999, Fisher was recommended for honorary veterans status, an honor former President Clinton bestowed in December 1999.

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