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Fisher House in Seattle will provide veterans, families a home away from home

'It is very much needed' here

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P-I REPORTER

When her husband, John, was shot by a sniper and paralyzed while serving in the Army in Iraq two years ago, Dena Bennett relied upon resilience, the family savings and compassionate countrymen to be near him during his recovery in Seattle.

The couple and their kids have long since returned home to Great Falls, Mont. But John and Dena Bennett said they will be in Seattle in spirit Friday as other kind strangers begin an effort to ensure that injured veterans and their families in Seattle don't endure what they did.

The first shovel of earth will be moved Friday afternoon to build a \$5 million, two-story, 21-private suite Fisher House next to the VA Puget Sound Medical Center on Beacon Hill. If all proceeds as scheduled, construction will begin in August and be completed by spring 2008, VA officials said.

The building is the latest in a network of similar homes away from home that are located near U.S. veterans and military hospitals for use by veterans' families.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.; Rep. Dave Reichert, R-Wash.; Rodney Skaar, captain of Boeing flight crew operations and local Fisher House board president; Fisher House Foundation President David Coker; and local VA officials will attend Seattle's groundbreaking Friday.

"It is something that is very much needed there," John Bennett, 35, a former Montana National Guard staff sergeant, said by telephone Thursday. "Being one of only four VA hospitals in the U.S. that deals with spinal-cord injuries -- and does it very well -- that is something that is definitely needed in Seattle.

"It takes away a lot of worries for the families and for soldiers like me."

The Fisher House philanthropy was established in 1990 by the late Zachary Fisher, a New York builder, and his wife, Elizabeth. It was designed to diminish emotional and financial drains on veterans' families

by providing wheelchair-friendly homes in which to stay for free during treatments. The houses are built through public donations.

Since then 38 have been built, with 21 planned over the next four years

The Fisher House Foundation proposed and received permission from the Veterans Affairs Department five years ago to include one in Seattle.

The local fundraising effort has ranged from support by the Seattle Seahawks and local luminaries to veterans groups, and even schoolkids raiding piggy banks. Although Seattle's share of construction funding trickled in, the Fisher House Foundation decided to proceed anyway.

To date, close to \$400,000 has been raised by the local community toward the goal of \$2 million to supplement the \$5 million committed by the Fisher House Foundation.

The Bennetts helped galvanize support when they shared their story with the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in April 2006.

John Bennett was wounded in Iraq in February 2005. He got medical treatment in Germany, then at Walter Reed in Washington, D.C. Finally, he came to Seattle and his family came with him. Without a Fisher House here, they stayed sometimes in seedy motels and lived on credit cards and the help of strangers to be near him.

"In my situation, I was in Seattle for four months after Walter Reed, and my wife was renting hotel rooms and driving a half-hour to an hour each way.

"The first night she got lost in a bad area, and I was here in the hospital, worried that I couldn't help her. If there had been a Fisher House, she would have been right across the street," John Bennett said.

"Next year when we are in Seattle for my eval, she will be."

FIND OUT MORE

Read a related P-I story at http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/268047_fisher26.html

To learn more about or to support the local Fisher House effort, see fisherhousevaps.org

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