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A home-away-from-home for injured vets' families

Group wants to build a Fisher House for Seattle

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By MIKE BARBER
P-I REPORTER

Laird Harris, president and chief executive of Harris & Smith Public Affairs in Seattle, is a Vietnam-era Navy veteran whose brother undergoes treatment in a Florida veterans hospital.

Seattle lawyer Dan Shea lost his brother, Marine Lt. Col. Kevin Shea, in Iraq on Sept. 14, 2004.

Both experiences motivated the two men to join several other local community leaders in building a Fisher House, a home-away-from-home in Seattle to diminish the emotional and financial hardships on the families of severely injured veterans.

They're part of a committee that will try to raise more than \$2 million to help build a Fisher House.

"I think there is a clear need. I'm very optimistic that this will be a very attractive project here," Harris said Tuesday.

Shea said the project keeps his brother alive in his memory.

"My motivation in dealing with grief is that it was tough, but I've found it has been helpful to channel it into positive things," he said.

"When Kevin died, people were looking for a way to help. Now I can channel people to building this," he said.

As the Seattle P-I reported in April, increasing numbers of seriously injured veterans are undergoing treatment at Seattle's VA Puget Sound Health Care System hospital, where the number of patients is expected to double by 2022.

The supportive and anxious families of severely wounded veterans, including about 2,021 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan treated from 2001 through 2005, often are left with no place near the medical center to stay.

The situation could be rectified with construction of a \$4.5 million, 21-suite, 17,000-foot dwelling through the non-profit Fisher House Foundation of Rockville, Md.

The philanthropy was established in 1990 by the late Zachary Fisher, a New York builder, and his wife, Elizabeth, to reduce the stress on veterans' families and to provide a wheelchair-friendly place for veterans to visit.

Although the VA does a good job caring for veterans, "they are not authorized to do much to assist veterans families -- unless they have a Fisher House," said Dave Coker, president of the Fisher House Foundation.

Local communities must share in the effort by coming up with half the cost to build a Fisher House. The foundation will provide the rest.

"Veterans' families won't be let out in the cold. ... It would be my hope that by the end of the year we would proffer a letter saying we want to give you (Seattle) a gift of a house," Coker said.

Coker plans a trip in September to inspect the proposed site across from Seattle's medical center.

Nationwide, the demand for Fisher Houses has increased since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began.

"We have had more than 70 Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers write and ask if they could have the gift of a Fisher House," Coker said.

The foundation builds the houses and gives them as gifts to the Veterans Affairs Department or the military, which in return must agree to operate and maintain them in perpetuity, he said.

The VA sets priorities for hospitals that need the houses the most.

"One of the ones at the top of the list is the Puget Sound Health Care System," Coker said. In Seattle, Harris and Shea are part of a newly formed Seattle Fisher House planning committee.

Others are Rod Skaar, a Boeing test pilot and retired state National Guard colonel; State Rep. Zack Hudgins, D-Tukwila; Vietnam Veterans of America representative-at-large Francisco Ivarra; Pat Norikane, a member of the board of the Wing Luke Museum; Kristen Michal of the lobbying group Washington2Advocates; and Seattle lawyers George Tady and Cliff Webster.

Jeri Rowe, spokeswoman for the VA Puget Sound Health Care System, said about \$80,000 in donations has been collected.

More in small amounts continues to be collected, largely by veterans-service organizations.

The committee, however, hopes to attract corporate sponsors, Harris said. The committee will also cast its fundraising net beyond Seattle.

"It benefits families from all over the Northwest as well as families in Seattle," Harris said. The hospital has clinics to treat spinal-cord injuries, polytrauma, post-traumatic stress and women's health.

Regionally, an eight-suite Fisher House is near Madigan Army Medical Center at Fort Lewis. However, it is too far for families with loved ones in Seattle's VA center.

HOW TO HELP

Tax-deductible donations for a Seattle Fisher House can be addressed to:

Fisher House Foundation

To support the Seattle/VA Puget Sound Fisher House

1401 Rockville Pike, Suite 600

Rockville, MD 20852.

Credit card donations may be made either by calling the foundation directly at 888-294-8560, or at the Fisher House Web site at: www.fisherhouse.org.

For more information, contact VA Puget Sound Health Care System Seattle Division at: 206-277-3950.

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