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Wednesday, October 25, 2006

Fisher House for families of hurt veterans will be built here

By [MIKE BARBER](#)
P-I REPORTER

A Fisher House to provide safe, free lodging for the families of severely injured veterans will be built in Seattle.

In town Tuesday to inspect the site and plans for a 21-unit, 16,800-square-foot Fisher House near Seattle's Veterans Affairs medical center on Beacon Hill, Dave Coker, Fisher House Foundation president, said his organization is committing all \$5 million needed for the project.

"We submitted a proffer to (Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson) on Sept. 21 of the gift of a house, and I have no doubt it will be accepted," said Coker, whose Rockville, Md., philanthropy has been called upon to help more and more since the wars began in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are 34 Fisher houses nationwide.

The Seattle area, however, which lagged in donations, still is being challenged to come up with \$2 million to help offset costs to build the sanctuary for the families of disabled veterans, he said.

"My budget for this house is \$5 million, and we are committed to that; if no one gives a dollar, we are going to build this house," Coker said.

"At the same time, we would love to give people in the Seattle area the opportunity to be a part of this initiative. We would use their money for this house and then redirect funds" to build another for severely injured veterans and their families elsewhere, Coker said.

Jeri Rowe, spokeswoman for VA Puget Sound Health Care Systems, said construction could begin in the spring and finish by late 2007.

The proposed site is southwest of the medical center on a small wedge of land next to a yawning VA center parking lot.

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"It's not the optimal situation," Coker said after walking the site. "We don't have 100 acres of parkland. That said, the mission is to meet the need. That property is a little tight, but we will make it work."

Coker's visit came as local fundraising efforts, which lagged for several years, are about to gear up.

The new Friends of the Fisher House of VA Puget Sound last Friday received its non-profit tax identification number. Rowe said the Seattle Seahawks are lending their considerable weight.

The Fisher House drive is expected to be part of the Seahawks' Nov. 12 Military Appreciation Day events, at which mothers, wives and siblings of some local military members killed or wounded in action could participate, Rowe said. coach Mike Holmgren has taped a personal appeal to fund the house, she said.

"Life's biggest battles are not fought on the football field," Holmgren begins, explaining that it is important for injured soldiers and veterans to have their families nearby.

Earlier this year only about \$80,000 in donations had trickled in to meet the \$2 million challenge. Now, Rowe said, a donor who does not want to be named has pledged \$100,000.

The Fisher House Foundation was established in 1990 by the late Zachary Fisher, a New York builder, and his wife, Elizabeth, to diminish emotional and financial drains on veterans' families and provide a wheelchair-friendly place for veterans to visit. The foundation builds the houses then gives them to the VA to run in perpetuity.

Coker said the foundation is working on building eight houses nationwide with a capital program of a little more than \$32 million.

Each 21-unit Fisher House helps an estimated 1,000 families a year, he said.

"We've provided over 2 million nights of lodging nationwide," he said.

As the Seattle P-I reported in April in chronicling the plight of John Bennett, a soldier shot and paralyzed in Iraq, and his wife, Dena, an

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increasing number of seriously injured veterans are undergoing treatment at Seattle's VA medical center, where the number of patients is expected to double by 2022.

Taxpayers fund the VA to care for veterans, but they don't provide for families.

In the Bennetts' case, Dena, their four children and family members at times lived on credit cards, choosing between seedy motels nearby or cleaner ones farther way, as well as the kindness of strangers and just plain hope as they rushed to John's side to support him through his agonizing surgeries and treatments.

HOW TO HELP

Donations for the Fisher House can be sent to:

Friends of the VA Puget Sound Fisher House

c/o Office of Public Affairs

1660 S. Columbian Way MS-OOPA

Seattle, WA 98018-1597

TO LEARN MORE

Read previous P-I stories and an editorial on the Web:

- goto.seattlepi.com/268047
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You also can find out about the Fisher House Foundation at www.fisherhouse.org.



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