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Fisher Houses offer refuge to vets' families, but money lacking for one here

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

After her husband was shot and paralyzed in Iraq, Dena Bennett, their four children and other family members lived on credit cards, the kindness of strangers and the hope that it would all get better.

As doctors worked first to save Staff Sgt. John Bennett's life, then create a life for him, his family had to fend for themselves in seedy motels, questionable neighborhoods and endless drives in unfamiliar cities, including Washington, D.C., and Seattle.

The veterans hospital system offered the best it had to Bennett. But his wife and their four children, ages 11 to 16, were often left out in the cold.

Theirs was a journey that the families of many other wounded veterans must make. But the Bennetts believe some of the pain could be eased if convenient accessible housing were available to all wounded veterans' families.

The Bennett family's journey began on Feb. 11, 2005, six miles south of Mosul. An Iraqi sniper with a high-powered Russian-made rifle took aim at the right seam of Bennett's armored vest and pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore through the weak spot of the vest and ripped into the Montana National Guardsman's abdomen. It shredded his digestive tract and ricocheted off his spine, paralyzing him from the waist down.



[zoom](#) Paul Joseph Brown / P-I

Dena Bennett helps her husband, John, get into their rental car as they leave their Tukwila hotel for appointments at the VA hospital in Seattle. Bennett was paralyzed from the waist down after being shot by a sniper in Iraq in February 2005.

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"I remember falling backward. I yelled at my guys to turn me over so I could shoot back, and then I yelled at them to get in the vehicle and stay put so they didn't get shot," recalled Bennett, now 34.

His last image was of a medic leaning over him. Then he blacked out and would not reawaken for three weeks.

By then he was at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., after having surgery in Balad, Iraq, and being airlifted to the Army's trauma center in Landstuhl, Germany.

Dena Bennett, now 35, received the phone call at her job doing Medicare billing at a hospital near Great Falls, Mont.

"Everything became a blur," she recalled. The colonel on the other end of the line knew little other than John had been shot in the abdomen. Dena automatically began phoning family, close friends and the family readiness unit of John's outfit, Charlie Company, 163rd Infantry Battalion. Her co-workers swung into action, donating vacation time so she could take time off.

Bennett dropped everything -- eventually losing her job -- and flew with her mother and mother-in-law to Landstuhl.

In disarray when they landed, the three women were shown to a Fisher House, a center with suites set up to accommodate families of wounded service members. They immediately felt the place, across the street from the hospital, to be a calm sanctuary amid chaos. The Fisher House philanthropy, established in 1990 by the late Zachary Fisher, a New York builder, and his wife, Elizabeth, of New York, was designed to diminish emotional and

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financial drains on veterans' families and provide a wheelchair-friendly place for veterans to visit.

The Fisher House foundation decided four years ago to build five more facilities, including one in Seattle that would have 21 suites. The Seattle house will cost \$4 million, and the Fisher organization will match up to \$2 million raised locally. So far, nearly \$70,000 has been raised. A major effort to raise money is expected to begin soon.

The Fisher House in Germany kept at bay the distractions the Bennetts didn't need.

One at a time they were able to visit the ICU in which John clung to life, praying for him through touch-and-go surgeries from Feb. 12 to Feb. 27, 2005.

They thought they'd lost him at one point when his colon burst after doctors tried to reconnect it, but somehow John survived.

The women's fervent wish was that they return together, with John, to the United States. Yet frustrations began as soon as they stepped off the C-17 ferrying John to Washington, D.C., on Feb. 28.

'An absolute headache'

"They took John on a bus to Walter Reed Medical Center and made me get in a van," Dena Bennett recalled. She couldn't see him for hours. Worse, though emotionally drained and physically exhausted, she was left to fend for herself in a strange city. Walter Reed's two Fisher Houses were full. There were more wounded soldiers than the hospital had expected.

Bennett used her credit card to find lodging for herself, her mother and her mother-in-law outside the city in a seedy, bug-infested motel.

A pricier hotel closer to Walter Reed charged \$180 a night but would not honor her \$80 Army voucher.

"Everything was an absolute headache," she said, until an aide to Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., heard of the women's plight and took them into her home, while seeking better shelter for them near Walter Reed.

"I'm a tough broad," Bennett said, half-jokingly, "and we have credit cards. But I can't imagine some of the younger 19-year-old wives, with husbands on private's salaries, who are in John's place going through what I went through."

Things didn't improve when they arrived in Seattle on April 8, 2005, for treatment at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System on Beacon Hill.

Dena spent every moment of the day with her hospitalized husband, awakening at 5 a.m. and staying glued to him from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. To be nearby, she had booked a motel a mile west of the medical center. When she checked in, she discovered a seedy place in a rough neighborhood. John's anxiety soared because she intended to walk back and forth to save cab fare.

"Where Dena was staying weighed very heavily on my mind," John Bennett said. She found a better place in Renton, but often became lost, wearily driving back and forth. One night she strayed off the highway onto a frightening street. Knowing no one else, she phoned John for help. It unsettled both of them.

"I was crying. I was upset. There was nothing I could do to help," John said. "Luckily, the on-duty nurse talked Dena back onto the interstate. She told Dena: 'Don't get out of the car. Don't stop to talk to anybody.' I was stressed about something happening to her."

Their four children would occasionally join Dena, at times all crowding into one motel room.

Local VA people helped fix some problems. Yet even after John became an outpatient and stayed with Dena and their kids at the motel, frustrations continued.

The devil was in the details, and the motel didn't have the right details.

"I need 600-count sheets," John recalls. "They're softer, avoid bedsores."

His other needs: "Roll-in showers with nozzles that can be reached, microwaves within reach, carpeting that doesn't bog down the wheelchair."

Transportation was a headache. To avoid the two days driving from Great Falls, the couple last week flew to Seattle. When they went to pick up the large Dodge they had reserved, they learned none was available, only a smaller Nissan.

So Dena reassembled John's wheelchair each time they parked at a motel, restaurant, or the hospital and broke it down before they left, because it couldn't fit intact into the smaller car's trunk.

John, meanwhile, spent the trip banging his head as he wrestled himself from his wheelchair through the smaller door frame.



zoom Paul Joseph Brown / P-I

John Bennett, second from left, and his wife, Dena, arrive at Seattle's VA Hospital for an appointment in the spinal cord injury unit. In the background are Vietnam vets Ernie Hume and Ken Balko, on bench

"For us, renting a car isn't a preference; it's a need," Dena said.

Funds well below goal

Although they have completed their visits to Seattle, the Bennetts worry about the growing number of injured veterans and their families in the pipeline.

Seattle's VA hospital, a hub for veterans health in Alaska and the Northwest, has grown into a nationally recognized research and teaching center that is attracting younger veterans, dropping the average age of its users to 56, below the national average of 59. Its units include ones for women's health, spinal cord injury, rehabilitation of the blind, multiple traumas, prosthetics, post-traumatic stress disorder and Gulf War illnesses.

Recent Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans who had long-term stays include nine patients with spinal-cord injuries, eight rehabilitation patients, one patient with multiple traumas and one blind patient.

The Bennetts are telling their story in hopes that \$2 million can be raised to build a Fisher House next to the medical center and across the street from the Jefferson Park Golf Course.

Although the Fisher House Foundation covers half the cost, federal law prohibits use of VA funding. The rest must come from Seattle businesses and community supporters. So far, only a fraction of what's needed has come in.

The Bennetts figure that raising the rest shouldn't be a problem for a city that likes to boast it has more millionaires per capita than any other in the United States.

"The beauty of a Fisher House is that I could have wheeled myself across the road and visited my family, instead of all the irritation Dena especially went through," Bennett said. Veterans and their families can adjust and heal together, he said.

Overall, 33 Fisher Houses now operate at 17 military bases and seven veterans medical centers. Fort Lewis has one near Madigan Army Medical Center.

Dena might have stayed there, but time and distance from John ruled that out for her. "There was no way I was going to be that far away from him," Dena said. "An hour, a half-hour, 15 minutes can make all the difference if something happens."

A well-tested team

As Bennett prepared to lift himself from the rental car at the Seattle VA's

spinal-cord-injury center into his titanium wheelchair last week, he did so with noticeably bulked-up arm and shoulder muscles. More than a year after he was wounded, Bennett has regained nearly 30 of the 60 pounds he lost, when he dropped from 205 to 143. He was in Seattle to have a tube near his pancreas removed. It's the last of the many tubes and drains that dangled spiderlike from his body a year ago.

As Dena puts together and breaks down his wheelchair with drill-team precision, it's clear they are a team. They have their moments, especially when the pain gets to him, but they aren't dwelling on the past.

"We decided we can do everything we did before he was shot, just differently," she said.

John almost never removes his Indianapolis Colts cap, his favorite football team, which honored him at a game last year. He's returning to hunting elk, and the couple plan to spend their June wedding anniversary in Las Vegas. In July, John expects to compete in five events in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Anchorage. Next fall, he hopes to coach kids in football.

Dena and John say the question they most often are asked is whether they are angry.

"We aren't mad at the government that John was shot," Dena says. "That's a risk we understand. What we went through after he was shot was frustrating and unnecessary, and should be fixed.

"At a time like this you need a temporary home away from home."

This story is one in an occasional series on soldiers returning from Iraq and their families and communities in Washington. We would like to hear from soldiers and their families on the home front or war front. Call 206-448-8018 or e-mail us at WarComesHome@seattlepi.com.

To read some of the previous stories in this series, visit www.seattlepi.com/specials/thewarcomeshome.

HOW TO HELP

Tax-deductible gifts may be made directly to "VA Puget Sound Fisher House Fund" and sent to C/O VA Puget Sound Health Care System Voluntary Services Division (S-005-VOL), Seattle, WA 98108.

For more information, contact VA Puget Sound Health Care System Seattle Division at: 206-277-3950. To learn more about Fisher House see www.fisherhouse.org

P-I reporter Mike Barber can be reached at 206-448-8018 or mikebarber@seattlepi.com.


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