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There's a way to help vets, families

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GUEST COLUMNIST

My brother, Lt. Col. Kevin Shea, USMC, was killed during a rocket attack in Fallujah, Iraq on Sept. 14, 2004. I still vividly remember answering the phone call in my kitchen and the voice of the Marine chaplain on the end of line informing me that my brother had been killed. In that exact moment, my life and the lives of my family changed forever.

The family members of more than 3,000 soldiers and Marines killed in Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced that same phone call. It is a devastating blow and it captivates most of the news stories. But lost sometimes in the headlines are the more than 21,000 veterans who have been critically wounded. Their families have experienced a life-changing phone call as well. Those families must get over the initial shock and rush to the aid of their injured loved ones who face a future of medical and emotional challenges.

The number of wounded with catastrophic injuries is increasing. The most severe combat injuries include brain injuries, spinal injuries and amputated limbs. The average stay in a military or VA hospital for a combat injury is close to two months. One of the biggest challenges for the families of an injured service member is lodging, because many of the military and VA hospitals are not equipped to provide long-term lodging to family members. Without lodging, the families are left to fend for themselves, often at their own expense.

The presence of loving family members is essential for the rehabilitation of a wounded service member, and the Fisher House Foundation is an organization committed to providing that presence. The Fisher House Foundation was established in 1990 by Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher to provide lodging to families of injured service members and veterans. Since 1990, the Fisher Foundation has built more than 35 Fisher Houses and saved families more than \$70 million in lodging expenses. Due to the growing need caused by our recent conflicts, the Fisher Foundation is looking to build more Fisher Houses where the need is most urgent.

One such place is Seattle. Increasing numbers of seriously injured are being treated at Seattle's VA Puget Sound Health Care System. Since 2001, more than 4,645 injured service members have been treated there. Most have traveled to the VA Puget Sound because of the specialized care offered for complex and traumatic combat injuries.

Because of Seattle's need, the Fisher Foundation has committed funds to build a Fisher House at the VA Puget Sound. The local non-profit "Friends of the VA Puget Sound Fisher House" was recently formed to raise \$2 million in community donations to augment construction costs and seed an endowment that will support the Fisher House. Construction on the VA Puget Sound Fisher House should begin in April 2007.

While remembering our war dead like my brother this Veterans Day, we should also not forget our fallen warriors who have survived but need our support. This Veterans Day, do something that demonstrates an appreciation for veterans and their families. Honor their service and support them

locally by contributing to the "Friends of the VA Puget Sound Fisher House."

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