

Families of vets get place to stay

NO MORE BILLS FOR COSTLY HOTELS FOR RELATIVES OF WOUNDED SOLDIERS

By Mark Emmons

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Pauline Lubens / Mercury News

Eduardo Javier Saldana Velasquez helps get Fisher House ready for its opening, after an effort that raised more than \$2 million in local donations to build the home.

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When Tonia Sargent arrived at the Veterans Affairs Medical Hospital in Palo Alto during the fall of 2004, she was under terrible stress.

She was worried for her severely wounded Marine Corps husband. Kenneth Sargent had been shot in the head by a sniper in Iraq weeks earlier and now was being transferred to the Palo Alto VA's unit for traumatic brain injuries. She was in an unfamiliar town and separated from their teenage daughters.

As if Tonia Sargent didn't have enough on her mind, there was this additional burden: The VA had no place for families of recuperating troops to stay.

"I was given a pamphlet of hotels in the area," she said. "I didn't have transportation, so I was given a bus route. There was nobody there for me. I knew there had to be a better solution."

Today that better solution will be officially opened -- a 21-suite Fisher House, which will provide free lodging to families of military personnel and veterans. It's the culmination of an 18-month effort that raised more than \$2 million in local donations to build the house on the VA grounds.

"It's important for families to have a place to call home," said Tonia Sargent, 37, whose husband has made steady progress from his wound. "A lot of healing and friendship can come from the house, too. Even though your situations are different, the roller coaster of emotions are the same for all of the families. It means so much to know that you're not struggling alone."

The Fisher House program, which has 34 facilities at military hospitals and VAs, provides housing to more than 7,000 families annually. It strives to create a "home away from home" feeling similar to the Ronald McDonald Houses, which aid families of seriously ill children.

In addition to the 21 rooms complete and bathrooms, the 16,000-square-foot Palo Alto house has a kitchen, dining room, living room, common room and laundry area.

“We're giving families help at a time when they need it the most,” said Dave Coker, president of the Maryland-based Fisher House Foundation. “Health care professionals say families can play an important role in recovery, so we want to help them be near their loved ones.”

More troops are surviving wounds in Iraq than in any other conflict in history. But the result is that more of them need extensive rehabilitation -- especially after suffering blast injuries. The Palo Alto VA is one of four “polytrauma” centers that treat brain injuries and other wounds, often sustained from explosions.

But the hospital was ill-equipped to deal with the influx of families who accompanied those wounded. That was because, by law, the VA cannot use government money to pay family expenses.

During the Sargents' initial monthlong stay in Palo Alto, families sometimes were housed at the “Hometel,” a building intended for use by veterans while they received treatment. If space was available, families could stay there. Often there wasn't.

“By 9 a.m. each day, I would have to leave the Hometel and then be back by 4:30 p.m. to be put on standby,” Tonia Sargent said. “There were many wives waiting to find if we had a room. It wasn't like I could flash my husband's Purple Heart like a badge.”

As the Palo Alto VA began a campaign to raise construction money, Tonia Sargent became one of the faces of the problem faced by military families.

Donations poured in.

“It was amazing how people's hearts and pockets just opened,” said Palo Alto VA spokeswoman Kerri Childress. “So many people had no idea that we were taking care of Iraqi vets here and that their families needed help.”

The Fisher Foundation, which is named after the late philanthropists Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher, supplied about half the money for the building, which cost about \$4.5 million. The rest was raised locally. Coker said John Arrillaga, the Peninsula real estate mogul, was the largest contributor -- though Childress said she doesn't know exactly how much he gave. San Jose high-tech company Cadence Systems Design donated \$900,000 from its annual benefit bowling event.

Some families began moving into the house this week. Now a master sergeant, Kenneth Sargent, 37, and his wife have returned to the VA so he can receive treatment in the center's rehabilitation unit for the blind.

Kenneth Sargent -- who suffered brain damage as well as impaired vision and loss of hearing in one ear -- can walk and talk again, and has returned to work two days a week when he's at Camp Pendleton. After he retires from the Marine Corps next year, he said, he would like to help other injured military personnel.

“I really understand now how much my wife has been there for me,” he said. “From eight days after I was shot, she never left my side.” The Fisher House, Tonia Sargent added, will make it easier for other families to do the same.