
Veterans' families find comfort at Fisher House in Houston

By **Manuella Libardi** | September 25, 2013 | Updated: September 26, 2013 2:12pm

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Photo: Jamaal Ellis, Staff

The first Fisher House for families of patients at the VA Medical Center has been packed, with an average stay of 10 days. A second house opened Wednesday.

Barbara Boutin and her daughter several years ago drove two hours from Evadale to

Houston to be at the side of Vietnam-veteran Jerome Boutin as he underwent treatment at the VA hospital.

Too busy worrying about her husband, Barbara Boutin said it never occurred to her to find somewhere to stay the night.

She and her daughter, Lisa Thomas, picked up a couple of Whataburger meals and spent hours roaming the city in their van in search of a cheap hotel room.

With no luck, the pair headed back to the hospital, locked the van, ate their burgers and tried to get some rest.

Since that night in the parking lot of the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center, the women have been back twice more as Jerome Boutin underwent various procedures for Parkinson's disease.

After that first restless night, they found a home away from home at Fisher House, which provides free lodging for families of military service members and veterans receiving health care treatment at the VA Medical Center.

'Been a blessing'

On Wednesday, mother and daughter were among dozens who gathered for the opening of a second Fisher House, located at 2002 Holcombe Blvd. The Fisher House Foundation has donated 61 houses scattered along 23 military installations and 22 VA medical centers in the U.S.



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Houston's Fisher House I is the busiest of the homes on VA medical centers, and the second home is expected to be just as busy, said Derek Donovan, vice president of programs for the Fisher House Foundation.

"I just thank God for the Fisher House," Boutin said on Wednesday. "It's truly been a blessing in our lives."

Boutin said extended family came up last weekend to visit with her husband, who is now on dialysis after his doctors discovered last month that his kidneys are failing.

"Everybody thought it was just awesome that his family was with him," she said.

Boutin said doctors aren't certain that her husband's health will improve. "It's not easy to sit and watch your loved one go," she said. "We never dreamed two weeks ago that he would be in the position he is now. You just sit and watch them leave."

But Boutin has found a support system at Fisher House.

She and Thomas have become friends with Nancy Erskine, who is also staying at Fisher House I while her husband recovers from heart surgery.

"You got friends if you had a bad day," Erskine said. "You got someone to give you a hug and a smile."

James Erskine, who is also a Vietnam veteran, had three veins and an artery replaced earlier this year. After the surgery, he was paralyzed and in a coma for 15 days.

"If I hadn't had the Fisher House, I would have had to go home, and he would have had to go through it alone," said Nancy Erskine, who lives in Winona. She said Fisher House gives families a place to "get something to eat and you know you got a place to sleep."

40 families can stay

Each of the two Houston Fisher Houses have 20 suites, allowing 40 families a place to stay for as long as they need to. The average stay is 10 days but some families have stayed

as long as two years, said Donovan.

Fisher House II cost about \$6.5 million to build and funds were donated by the Fisher House Foundation to the VA Medical Center, which is responsible for maintaining the homes.

The new house is expected to house 300 to 500 families a year.

Fisher House can be reached at 713-794-8095.

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