

The Defenders Lodge



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

Stories of successful human endeavors are always welcome around the holidays. One of the best stories I've encountered in the year past is the saga of the Defenders Lodge.

The veterans hospital in Palo Alto is the regional center in our area where veterans receive medical treatment. The VA offers the medical, surgical, psychiatric, rehabilitation, neurology, oncology, dentistry, geriatrics and extended care services needed by veterans

of recent conflicts and all prior wars. The Palo Alto VA also offers specialized programs such as a Polytrauma Rehabilitation Center, a Spinal Cord Injury Center, a Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center, a Traumatic Brain Injury Center, the Western Blind Rehabilitation Center, a Center for Homeless Veterans and the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that bring veterans to this facility from around the West and across the nation. The Palo Alto VA accommodates nearly 1 million veteran outpatient visits every year.

Many veterans and their families, especially younger soldiers who have served in recent wars, are of very modest means. As we know, Palo Alto and the surrounding region has among the highest costs of living in the country. A hotel or motel stay overnight in Palo Alto can cost \$100, \$200, or even \$300 per night, a price that is far beyond the budget of most military families. These are the costs military families have been facing when service members need medical treatments offered at the Palo Alto VA.

The staff at the Palo Alto VA began to hear that vets could not afford to come to Palo Alto for treatments. They also began to notice that those vets and their families who did come sometimes slept in their cars in the parking lot at the Palo Alto VA, because they could not afford a hotel or motel. They found that nearly 3,000 veterans per year who came to the VA were not able to stay overnight in a small, older housing facility that existed at the complex, but had to seek housing elsewhere in the Palo Alto area at high cost. Many who might otherwise come for their treatments might not have come at all because of the housing costs.

A few individuals and institutions decided to take charge and solve this problem. Several of those who stepped up made an ex-

traordinary difference. They included Lisa Freeman, director of the Palo Alto VA; the leadership of the Pentagon Federal Credit Union and its foundation; and Lee and Penny Anderson, private donors who provided a major contribution to the project. Lee Anderson is a West Point graduate who heads Minnesota-based APi Group. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs also contributed, making the project a public-private partnership. And a number of our local business leaders and philanthropists – VISA Corporation, Mike and Mary Ellen Fox, George Marcus, the Sobrato family, the Knights of St. John, the Bechtel family, Condoleezza Rice, the Shultz family, the 49ers Foundation, Lockheed Martin and others – have supported and contributed to the project. Kudos to all of these generous folks.

Most of the \$17 million to pay for the facility was quickly pledged, and a project that was just a concept a couple of years ago will open in January 2014. The Defenders Lodge will provide 52 suites with 104 beds, and it will be able to house almost 19,000 overnight stays per year for vets and their families.

The main challenge, when I served as emcee for the dinner in early October at Stanford celebrating the success of the project, was to fit everyone who had made a difference onto the program. It was truly an uplifting event, marking a project that came together quickly and effectively to support a good cause. There was collaboration among private and public organizations, between current and former officials, with financial institutions and with individual donors. Local public agencies handled planning consideration for the new facility expeditiously. Now the Department of Veterans Affairs is looking at how this

model might be replicated around the country, setting up Defenders Lodges at others among the hundreds of veterans treatment centers throughout the United States.

We seem so mired in the inability to accomplish much in Washington that the Defenders Lodge strikes me as a terrific example of people from various sectors taking matters into their own hands to get something done. If just left to the federal institutions responsible for caring for veterans, building such a facility would have taken much longer and might never have happened. But when officials, companies, philanthropists and others simply assumed responsibility and took charge, the project came together rapidly.

Increasingly, we must look to these kinds of initiatives to solve our problems. While Washington battles sway one way or another and some things do get done, the pitched fighting and gridlock in Congress simply do not measure up to meeting the practical challenges before us. 🍀

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