

VA Fisher House Program Community Partner Reference Guide





Introduction

VA Fisher Houses receive support from the community in many different ways. VA Fisher House community partners may be established 501(c) (3) non-profit community groups or informal groups with a mission of supporting a local VA Fisher House. VA recognizes the investment of time and effort to support VA Fisher House construction and continued efforts by the local community to support the needs of Fisher House guests long term. Without the support of the local community, VA Fisher Houses would not exist and VA would not be able to meet the mission of providing, “a home away from home” for the families and Caregivers of hospitalized Veterans and Active Duty Servicemembers. This reference guide provides a general overview of the VA Fisher House Program and key points of interest for community groups to consider when establishing a relationship with local VA Fisher House Programs.

Fisher Houses are “a home away from home,” providing a comfortable environment where families can come together to provide support to one another. Fisher Houses are constructed by Fisher House Foundation on government land (military bases or VA Medical Facility grounds). Upon completion, VA Fisher Houses are donated to the Department of Veterans Affairs and become a federal building. VA assumes responsibility for operation, maintenance, upkeep, and staffing.

Fisher House Foundation and the Department of Veterans Affairs established a national partnership in 1994 when the first VA Fisher House was built at the Samuel S. Stratton VA Medical Facility in Albany, New York. The National Partnership between VA and Fisher House Foundation continues to grow and is a phenomenal example of a public-private partnership “best practice.”

As of February 2015, there are 26 active VA Fisher Houses. Currently, Fisher Houses are located at VA Medical Facilities in Albany, New York; Augusta, Georgia; Bay Pines, Florida; Boston, Massachusetts; Hines, Illinois; Cincinnati, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Gainesville, Florida; Houston, Texas (2 houses); Los Angeles, California; Miami, Florida; Minneapolis, Minnesota (2 houses); Murfreesboro, Tennessee; Palo Alto, California; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Richmond, Virginia; Salt Lake City, Utah; San Antonio, Texas; Seattle, Washington; St. Louis, Missouri; Tampa, Florida; Washington DC; and West Palm Beach, Florida. New Fisher House construction is underway at the Milwaukee VAMC,



Wisconsin; Portland VAMC, Oregon. Future VA Fisher House Program expansion to at least 44 VA Fisher Houses is planned over the next several years.

With the exception of the Denver VA Fisher House located on the grounds of the former Fitzsimmons Army Hospital, all VA Fisher Houses are within walking distance of the VA Medical Facility. The houses are typically 7,800 to 16,800 square foot homes with eight to 21 bedrooms. Each house is professionally furnished and decorated in the style of the local region. They feature private suites with private baths and common areas, including kitchens, laundry facilities, dining rooms, living rooms, and libraries. New VA Fisher Houses are designed with elevators to be wheelchair accessible. They have 5 to 16 bedroom suites with private baths.

Fisher Houses are home-like environments where families can prepare meals, do their laundry, relax with a book from the library, watch TV or a DVD, play games, utilize the internet, and visit with other families. VA does not charge families to stay in Fisher Houses.

VA Fisher House Program Eligibility

The mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Fisher House Program is to provide temporary overnight accommodations to visiting families and Caregivers of hospitalized Veterans or Active Duty Servicemembers; and for Veterans or Active Duty Servicemembers undergoing an extended outpatient episode of care if accompanied by a family member or Caregiver. Section 221(a) of the Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-419) gave VA legislative authority to accept Fisher Houses constructed and donated by the Fisher House Foundation and to use appropriated funds to operate and maintain Fisher Houses. These statutory provisions regarding Fisher Houses have been codified at 38 U.S.C. 1708 and are administered by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

In order to receive accommodations in a VA Fisher House, an individual must:

- Be actively involved in the care of a Veteran or Active Duty Servicemember hospitalized in a VA or Military Hospital for an episode of care or be hospitalized in a Community hospital in which VA is coordinating or funding the admission.



- Be medically stable and capable of self-care or be accompanied by an individual able to provide the necessary care. VA does not provide nursing or other medical care in VA Fisher Houses.
- Be required to travel 50 or more miles or at least 2 hours from their home to the VA medical facility. Exceptions to these distance or time provisions may be made based on exceptional circumstances, such as inclement weather, road conditions, or the mode of transportation used.
- Be able to stay in an unsupervised setting.
- VA Fisher Houses are not used to accommodate unaccompanied Veterans or Active Duty Servicemembers, or individuals in need of transitional or permanent housing.
- Decisions concerning VA Fisher House accommodations are to be made by the VA medical facility's Fisher House Manager. If space is unavailable, referrals for alternative temporary accommodations may be made by the Veteran or Active Duty Servicemembers' Social Worker or Case Manager.

VA Fisher House Operations

Once VA Fisher House construction is complete, Fisher House Foundation officially turns the building over to the local VA Medical Facility Director and the Fisher House becomes a federal building. The Medical Facility Director is responsible for all operations including but not limited to staffing and general building maintenance. VA Medical Facilities establish a local Fisher House Program and engage key Medical Facility departments to ensure program success.

Fisher House Staffing: VA Fisher House Program staffing varies depending upon the size of the house and volume of guests that the Fisher House accommodates. All VA Fisher Houses have a full-time Fisher House Program Manager who has overall program responsibility. Other staff may include Assistant Managers and Program Support Assistants. All VA Fisher House Managers and support staff are VA employees and selected through the official VA hiring process in collaboration with Human Resources. VA Fisher House Housekeeping Staff may be VA Employees or contracted staff. The hiring of all VA Staff is the responsibility of the local VA Medical Facility.



Relationship between VA Fisher House Managers and Community Partners

It is important to note the importance of a strong relationship between the VA Fisher House Manager and community partners. The Fisher House Manager is the pulse of the Fisher House and identifies the unique needs of Fisher House Guests. The Fisher House Manager is not supervised by the community partners or local Fisher House Board. It is the expectation that the community partner acts in support of the local Fisher House Manager, raising awareness of the house through speaking engagements, soliciting goods, services and other donations and providing funding for programs deemed necessary by the Manager. The Manager may report to the board or community partner at their regular meetings and assists them in their message by providing up-to-date statistics, information and resources to help them tell the Fisher House story. It is the expectation that the Fisher House Manager will communicate unmet needs of Fisher House Guests to community partners who have the potential to assist. Fisher House Managers should support community partners within the parameters of VA policy to educate and promote the local VA Fisher House Program. It is the responsibility of the Fisher House Manager to act as liaison and first point of contact between the community partner, the Board of Directors and the Medical Facility departments. Here are additional key points to remember:

- Fisher House Managers may attend fundraising events hosted/coordinated by the community partner in their official capacity to discuss how the group supports the Fisher House. Fisher House Managers may provide education to event attendees about the Fisher House Program (i.e. occupancy, future and ongoing needs of Fisher House Guests).
- As federal employees, Fisher House Managers may not solicit donations on behalf of Fisher House Community Partners.
- Fisher House Managers may be invited to attend the Community Partner's board meetings to provide an update on local Fisher House Program activities and to provide input on upcoming and ongoing needs of Fisher House Guests. Fisher House Managers should be prepared to discuss how community partners can best support the Fisher House Program and guests.



- Fisher House Managers are not permitted to be active participants or hold positions on Fisher House Community Boards. They cannot attend events representing community boards or cannot solicit donations for the community boards.
- Fisher House Community Partners should establish a mailing address and phone number for distribution to the public so that monetary/check donations meant for the community boards are sent to them directly. Donations meant for the Fisher House Community Board should not be directed to the VA Fisher House.
- VA Fisher Houses should not be utilized as a way to promote the local community partner or solicit donations. Standards of Conduct prohibit the VA Medical Facilities from taking any actions that would infer VA endorses any community group or its activities. VA regulations prohibit fundraising activities on VA grounds (with the exception of Combined Federal Campaign activities). 38 CFR 1.218. Examples of activities that would result in an impermissible endorsement would be allowing the community group to have its name or logo emblazoned on the tent in which part of these activities would take place, giving the organization a speaker's role in the event, or allowing the organization's representatives to hand out flyers and other printed materials that promote their specific organization to open house attendees.
- VA's gift-acceptance policy does provide that VA may acknowledge its gratitude to those persons and organizations that have chosen to give to VA. For instance, VHA's Handbook 4721, VHA General Post Fund (GPF) Procedures, provides that a Facility Director must express his or her appreciation in writing for any accepted gift. The policy does not prohibit VA representatives from making oral statements of appreciation, so long as that statement does not amount to an endorsement. For example, a brief remark during the proceedings by a VA official recognizing the generosity of the Friends of the Fisher House Community Partner would be within the VA official's discretion, without running afoul of either the Standards of Conduct or the GPF policy.

Fisher House Staff and Community Partner Involvement with Guests: VA Fisher House Staff receive training about the importance of establishing and recognizing professional boundaries. Professional boundaries are guidelines, rules, or limits established by the organization to identify what are reasonable, safe, and permissible ways for other people to behave and how they will respond when someone steps outside those limits. Staff understands the importance of providing support to Fisher House Guests without overstepping personal and/or relational boundaries. Many times, Fisher House staff will engage the Veterans' Social Worker, Case Manager, or Chaplain Services to provide support



and intervention when needed. It is the expectation of all Fisher House volunteers and community partners to have a general understanding of the need for healthy personal boundaries and to report guest concerns to Fisher House Staff. For more information or training about establishing boundaries with VA Fisher House Guests, please contact the local Fisher House Manager.

VA Fisher House Donations

VA Fisher House GPFs: VA Fisher Houses receive donations from the community in a variety of ways. All VA Fisher Houses are required to establish a Fisher House GPF for the purpose of accepting donations for the local Fisher House. GPF Accounts are those accounts which have been established for monetary donations. Most VA Medical Facilities have a number of GPF accounts for various Veteran programs. Each account has a specific purpose. Deposits to and expenditures from these accounts must meet the specified purpose as established by the parameter of the account. GPFs cannot be used to pay for salaries. Fiscal and Voluntary Service track all expenses by the GPF.

Fisher House GPF accounts are earmarked accounts set up to receive donations specifically to support the needs of the Fisher Houses. GPFs may be used for various purchases, such as comfort items, paper products, kitchen staples, etc. GPF Funds may not be used for things like paying utility bills, though sometimes it is used for internet service for Fisher House computers. Sometimes large monetary donations come in for special projects, like building a gazebo or patio. Before donations for projects are made, please consult with the local Fisher House Manager so that project feasibility can be determined in accordance with VA Policy. Donations received by the medical facility to support the local Fisher House must be accepted in accordance with VA policy in collaboration with VA Voluntary Service (VAVS).

VA accepts donations from community partners, organizations, and individuals who wish to support local Fisher Houses and donors may give these donations to the local Fisher House Manager or the Chief of Voluntary Service. Donations received must be deposited into the Fisher House GPF. VA cannot accept donations for the “Fisher House Foundation.” Those donations must be forwarded directly to Fisher House Foundation and made payable to “Fisher House Foundation.”

Fundraising for New Fisher House Construction: Fisher House Foundation requires that money raised for construction of a new VA Fisher House be donated directly to the



Foundation, which coordinates all aspects of Fisher House construction. Since VA cannot donate funds to the Foundation, it is critical for community partners willing to facilitate fund-raising to become “community champions” for this task. Individuals from affiliated universities, large corporations, foundations, Veterans Service Organizations, and community leaders are often open to serving on a fund-raising committee. VA staff may assist such a committee by providing information/education about the many benefits provided to Veterans and their families/Caregivers by Fisher Houses. In addition, VA staff may explain the need for outside fundraising as required by the terms of the Fisher House Foundation’s offer to VA. Finally, VA may acknowledge gifts to VA by Fisher House Foundation with the assistance of others, such as a committee of local fundraisers. However, VA’s authority to assist with outside fundraising is limited. For example, VA staff may not endorse a committee’s fundraising for construction of a Fisher House. Also, VA staff on VA time may not assist in setting up a fundraising committee and may not serve on such a committee. VA staff **may not** provide administrative support to such a committee while on duty using federal materials.

Funds raised by community partners for Fisher House construction must be given directly to Fisher House Foundation, not to the VA Medical Facility. Although the funds are for construction of a Fisher House on VA grounds, the funds are not being donated to the VA. The Fisher House does not become the property of the VA Medical Facility until construction is complete and the Fisher House has been formally donated to the VA.

In addition to monetary donations, there are many ways community partners can offer support to local VA Fisher Houses. Prior to making a donation, please consult with your local Fisher House Manager or Voluntary Service Chief to determine the current local needs. The following are examples of ways community partners may be able to assist:

- Assist in providing food and supplies for the house – either purchasing it directly or providing the manager with gift cards for the purpose of purchasing food and supplies
- Provide lodging of overflow guests when the Fisher House is at capacity
- Provide bottled water/water service
- Contract with local transportation company to assist with rides to/from airport, to the store, etc.
- Apply for grants - depending on eligibility
- Sponsor special events/parties and help coordinate volunteers to prepare meals
- Provide landscaping services and garden improvements
- Donate new/replacement appliances, furniture, etc.
- Provide for “deep” cleaning of the house



- Sponsor family activities outside of the house, i.e. manicures, pedicures, dinners, etc.
- Speak at events to raise awareness and help raise money for the house
- Support construction of storage sheds; pergolas, playgrounds (Please note that any structural modifications or additions to VA Fisher Houses must receive final approval from VA Central Office and Fisher House Foundation.)

Fisher House Service Project Ideas:

Outdoor Projects:

Fisher House Foundation includes comprehensive landscaping tailored to each specific location as part of the Foundation's gift of each Fisher House to the VA. Proposed projects should be designed to harmonize with the existing landscaping, while supporting the needs of Veterans and their families/Caregivers staying at the Fisher House. Project examples include:

- Spring clean up
- Fall clean up
- Trimming bushes
- Planting flowers
- Power wash the patio, shutters
- Organizing/cleaning the shed
- Construct raised garden beds
- Build some kind of waterfall feature for the backyard
- Trash pick-up and weeding around the yard
- Update mulch/bark in the yard (will need to get it donated and pick it up)
- Sweep, organize and wash off all patio and walkway areas outside

Indoor Projects:

- Wash baseboards/woodwork
- Organizing/cleaning/washing kitchen cabinets
- Wrapping Christmas/holiday presents
- Cooking/baking
- Assemble toiletry bags for each room
- Sponsor pampering night (i.e. facials, hand treatments, make-up, massages, and nails)
- "How-To classes" (i.e. teaching the families how to scrapbook, cook, crochet)
- Prepare lunches or pre-made meals the families can heat up later
- Sponsor an event (meal, activity) for the families
- Make and donate a holiday gift for each family



- Make and donate blankets for each family; bring in craft supplies and make them with the families
- Bring in baked goods for the families
- Deep cleaning of the home (i.e. baseboards, appliances, walls, doors, windows)

VA Fisher House Volunteer Management

VA Fisher House Volunteers are the cornerstone of the VA Fisher House Program. The local VA Medical facility Voluntary Service (VAVS) Department assists Fisher House Managers with identifying, screening and training potential volunteers. Before a volunteer is assigned to the Fisher House, the individual must complete the screening process; receive an orientation to the facility and to the VAVS Program. Following this initial training, the Fisher House Manager provides the volunteer with a thorough introduction to and overview of the Fisher House. The Fisher House Manager also works with VAVS to determine if the volunteer is a “good fit” for the Fisher House environment based upon the individual’s assignment preference and interests, in addition to providing the ongoing training, scheduling, evaluation, and supervision of the volunteer.

VA Fisher House community partners are instrumental in the recruitment of Fisher House volunteers. If a community partner receives an inquiry related to volunteering in the local Fisher House, they should be referred to the Fisher House Manager for further direction and information, including review of the VA volunteer onboarding process.

VA Fisher House Media and Public Affairs

A successful VA Fisher House Program relies heavily on public awareness. VA Fisher House Community Partners do a phenomenal job of promoting the local VA Fisher House through a variety of media outlets including newspaper articles, radio and television interviews, and internet activities (i.e. community partner webpages, Facebook, and Twitter). It is extremely important that local VA Fisher House Community Partners establish a relationship with the VA Medical Facility Public Affairs Officer (PAO). Community partners not only represent their involvement and support of the local VA Fisher House, they also



represent the local VA Medical Facility. The local PAO may provide guidance about topics to discuss during an interview and potential topics that may be more appropriately addressed by VA Medical Facility Staff. In addition, it is very important to also coordinate media events with the National Fisher House Foundation. For more information about conducting media events related to VA Fisher Houses, please contact your local VA Fisher House Manager.



References

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