
Life House provides end-of-life care for an aging generation

By David Flaum

Friday, January 11, 2008

For its 21 years, Alpha Omega Veterans Services has been about filling gaps in aid for homeless veterans.

The opening of the nonprofit group's eight-bed hospice -- they call it Veterans Life House -- patches a hole none of the agency people expected.

"We never thought we'd need this type of facility when we started out," Cordell Walker, executive director, told about 50 people who turned out for an open house this week at the facility on Central Avenue.

But aging and health problems -- especially of Vietnam-era veterans who make up much of the agency's service base -- created the need, he and others said.

Just ask Mark Sparks, a 10-year Navy veteran. Sparks, 61, who had lived in Alpha Omega and other housing for the homeless for most of the past 11 years, has Stage 4 chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). For the past year, he has been in another Alpha Omega facility, but his illness put a strain on his ability to live there.

"It was like a godsend to me when they said they have a place for extended care," Sparks said, as he sat in an easy chair in the front room of the Life House, a breathing tube under his nose connecting to an oxygen tank on the cart next to him.

Sparks expects to move into the home in the next two or three weeks, he said.

When it opens, it will be the third hospice of its kind in the nation, said Pete Dougherty, director of homeless programs for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

In addition to need, one of the factors the VA looks at in putting money into such programs -- Alpha Omega got \$63,000 -- is the ability of the organization to provide high-quality service, Dougherty said.

"Alpha Omega has a good track record of being able to do just that," he said.

The agency leased the house from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development in 1991, using it as sort of a halfway house for veterans who have gone through the agency's 30- or 90-day recovery and counseling programs, Walker said. It bought the home in 1997.

After the nursing home program at the Memphis Veterans Medical Center was shut down several years ago, Alpha Omega people started looking into ways to help veterans "at the end of their lives," he said.

The result: renovation of the house on Central.

To pay for it, Alpha Omega applied for a grant from the Tennessee Housing Development Agency's housing trust fund.

"This program just shot to the top as a program that really met the needs for people who would not have been taken care of otherwise," said Patricia M. Smith, director of public affairs for THDA.

The fund awarded the agency \$124,000, provided it matched the amount.

Alpha Omega used the Veterans Affairs grant and got a donation credit for the \$70,000 value of the house. The group raised \$20,000 from private donations to pay for work not covered by the grants, such as hardwood floors, Walker said.

United Way has put in about \$12,000 for operations and the Veterans Affairs department will contribute \$33 a day for each resident.

Along with people like Sparks with terminal or life-threatening illnesses, veterans recovering from surgery will be able to stay there, said Jolie Malone, program coordinator.

The residents will get meals, transportation, medical care, oversight of medication, even grief counseling, she said.

"I am ecstatic about this house," said Sue Stevens, director of social work services for the Memphis VA hospital.

Many veterans at the end of their lives have no friends or family to take them in, she said.

"If you don't meet the criteria to go to a nursing home, what do you do?" she said. The Alpha Omega house is an answer.

- David Flaum: 529-2330

VETERANS LIFE HOUSE

Address: 1154 Central

Operator: Alpha Omega Veterans Services

Purpose: Provide hospice care, living facilities for homeless veterans with life-threatening conditions or recovering from surgery.

Size: Eight beds

Scheduled opening: Late January

Phone: 726-5066

Web: aovs.org



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