



Plans laid out for veterans home

Far from a typical institution, initial plans call for a half-dozen houses around a communal space.

Updated: Friday, October 31, 2008 1:00 PM PDT

By SHEILA HAGAR of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA -- State Veterans Affairs officials were in the city this week to discuss plans and momentum for the state veterans home proposed at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

At the National Guard Armory, architects and state VA staff showed an audience of several dozen people how things might look here.

Trends in long-term care are changing, explained Alfie Alvarado, deputy director of the state VA. Traditionally, concepts of such care have included two patients to a room inside an institutional-looking building along a maze of corridors.

In most of those systems, residents, hungry or not, are taken to three meals a day on someone else's schedule. Kitchens, nursing and laundry areas -- at the end of long halls -- are usually off-limits to patients, further diminishing a sense of home, self-management and independence, she said.

And that's not how a new local VA nursing home will look, according to plans presented at the meeting.

Traditionally, nursing and rehabilitation homes have had a strictly medical focus, with little decision making left up to those being the most impacted. "Here, it is a choice," Alvarado said, glancing up at plans displayed on the Armory wall via PowerPoint.

Initial plans -- calls for six residential houses of several bedrooms, housing about 12 people each with an allotment of 773 to 932 square feet per person, clustered around a communal space, such as a clubhouse.

Since kitchens would be in each home, residents would help set meal times and menus. As now planned, resident needs would drive services provided and each employee would do a variety of jobs, including health care, cooking and cleaning, Alvarado told the group. "It's a whole new concept."

When people have to move out of their homes for health reasons, they often forfeit privacy, possessions and dignity, VA officials and project planners pointed out. The new model means everything in the nursing home belongs to residents, and the house itself is an integral, participatory component of a neighborhood.

"When we're done, this is not going to feel like a nursing home," Alvarado said.

Similar projects are in place at Sheridan, Wyo., and Retsil, Wash.

The team has assessed the Walla Walla VA campus to see how best to situate the houses and cash in on view of the mountains and the sports fields that edge the property. Information was gathered to determine land uses, sun angles, wind direction and where the large and aged trees on the campus cast their deepest shade.

Future development of the Walla Walla VA campus through the enhanced lease-use plan could impact the views from the planned nursing home complex, officials agreed. "That's when we plant trees and make a natural fence to make a peaceful environment for residents, Alvarado said.

These plans, even being preliminary, are the best he's seen, said Don Schack, past commander of Blue Mountain Veterans Coalition and commander of American Legion Post 32.

"It's outstanding, as far as the veteran community is concerned. We look at it as a win-win situation," he said. "We're enthused, really we are."

Local veterans realize the project won't happen overnight, but the concept is right on the money when it does

come together, Schack feels. "It can handle all the situations we may be looking at, the ambulatory, the non-ambulatory and the true nursing home care. And that's just what we need."

He would take advantage of the proposed care himself if he was in need of it, he added. "As a senior veteran looking at having a facility of that quality close by, why would I hesitate?"

"This is the best news we've heard in the past five years."

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