

Addressing a Need

An Interview with Kenneth Fisher,
Partner, Fisher Brothers, and Chairman and
Chief Executive Officer, Fisher House Foundation



EDITORS' NOTE Ken Fisher is responsible for managing, marketing, and leasing a portfolio of more than six million square feet of Fisher Brothers-owned Class A real estate in midtown Manhattan. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Intrepid Museum Foundation and a member of the Real Estate Board of New York's Board of Governors Executive Committee. Fisher also sits on the board of The Association for the Help of Retarded Children, The Jackie Robinson Foundation, and The General Command & Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth.



Kenneth Fisher

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Fisher House program (www.fisherhouse.org) is a unique private/public partnership that supports America's military in their time of need by donating "comfort homes" built on the grounds of major military and VA medical centers that enable family members to be close to a loved one at the most stressful times, including during hospitalization for an unexpected illness, disease, or injury. Annually, the Fisher House program now serves more than 17,000 families, and has made available over four million days of lodging to family members since the program originated in 1990. By law, there is no charge for any family to stay at a Fisher House operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Fisher House Foundation reimburses the individual Fisher Houses operated by the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Fisher House Foundation also administers and sponsors Scholarships for Military Children, the Legacy Scholarship and Military Spouse Scholarship programs, and the Hero Miles program, and co-sponsors the Newman's Own Award.

How has the Fisher House Foundation evolved and has the mission remained the same or has that also evolved?

The mission is the reason we have maintained the level of outreach that we now have. When we did deviate from the mission, we did it in a way that was related to lodging and military families. So we deviated through Hero Miles, which is the partnership with the airlines where people donate unused frequent flyer miles and we buy tickets for family members to fly because they are part and parcel to the healing process.

The program has evolved in that as the needs grew, so did the size of the houses. But there is a level at which you have to stop and when it comes to the size of the houses, 16,000 square feet or 20 rooms is as big as I ever want to build – I don't want to get larger because then they become impersonal like a hotel.

How do you focus on where to build?

We run it like a public company, so we treat the donors as shareholders. The government tells us where the need is and that's where we go. So we don't build just because we have the money.

What are your plans for additions in coming years?

We will build a Fisher House in the U.K. for our British allies, splitting the cost of that house with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Trust in Birmingham and Help for Heroes foundation; we're building one in Fort Belvoir; and we're building one in San Antonio, because they are making the Audie L. Murphy VA Hospital a Level One polytrauma center and we vowed we would always have a Fisher House at each Level One polytrauma – they get the most difficult cases and the longest stays.

But 90 percent of what we're doing in the future will be geared towards the VA, because their needs are ongoing, whereas the Department of Defense will only handle the immediate casualties. The VA still handles veterans from Korea, Vietnam, the First Gulf War, and from Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom. So even if the casualty rate starts to slow down, which it already has, the VA's needs will always be greater.

How have you been so effective in building such a strong public/private partnership?

The core mission is compelling, but we have hit a need that will always be there. War has always yielded casualties and not every story has a happy ending. But the reason it works is because we bring our skill set to the table, which is development and construction. We know how to build the houses faster and cheaper than the government due to the bureaucracy they seem to have to maintain.

These houses are privately built with donated funds, but they are gifted to the

government, which operates and maintains them in perpetuity. This means we don't have to create an endowment; we don't need to back-track and raise money to maintain the houses, which would severely limit our mission.

We built almost 12 houses over the past fiscal year and that's almost \$70 million we have given to the government as a gift. Operating the houses is not as costly as building them. The government staffs them so there is a continuity of care, because all of the doctors are Department of Defense or VA employees.

I believe public/private partnerships are the future of this country.

How critical has the scholarship program been for military children?

We offer Scholarships for Military Children, which we administer for the Defense Commissary Agency. We have given out almost \$8 million in scholarship money since we started the program in 2001. We also have a Military Spouse Scholarship program so upon deployment, a spouse can get an education.

Our Legacy Scholarship program is aimed at the children of those who have given the ultimate sacrifice to this nation or those that are 100 percent disabled. President Obama put in the seed money for this when he donated the after-tax profits from the children's book he wrote.

So the scholarship programs have, and will continue to be a great outreach.

You're building houses that are communities for people. Did you realize that early on?

No. There was always the unknown X factor of putting people that don't know each other together in a community type environment. But they instantly bond because they have so much in common: they have a loved one who is sick or wounded; they can't afford to stay in a hotel; they come from all over the country and the world; and they don't know the local area. The houses are all sited so that they can walk to the hospital, because they have to be in walking distance. The support system of being together in that house benefits them. The minute they come in, they are embraced by the other families. And that support system is a byproduct that has made the program what it is. ●

The Fisher House for the Veterans Administration of Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System