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Iowa veterans gain freedom, family through foster program

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Winterset, Ia. - If they weren't living in Joe Wymer's house, Vietnam War veterans Ron Marusek and Bob Fenoglio would be in a nursing home by now.

Marusek, 65, has terminal cancer. Fenoglio, 67, has a severe case of multiple sclerosis. Both decided to enroll in a new federal program in which veterans can choose to live with paid "foster families" instead of in an institution.

"They're awfully nice to me," Marusek said of his foster family, which includes local residents whom Wymer hires to come over and help. "They take care of you like you're gold. They treat you with respect and compassion."

Wymer smiled. "You're forgetting the best part," he said. "We're family."

"That's right," Marusek said. "I feel like Joe's older brother."

The arrangement is organized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, whose nurses and other staff members make regular visits to the foster homes. The veterans directly pay the homeowners for services, including meals, bathing, laundry, medication assistance and transportation to doctors' offices and local stores. Marusek pays \$2,000 a month, which comes from his military pension and Social Security. Fenoglio, who uses a wheelchair and needs more help, pays \$3,000 per month.

The idea is new in Iowa, with just four veterans living in three foster homes so far. Nationwide, about 600 veterans have participated in the program since it started in 2000 in Arkansas.

Jan O'Briant, a VA social worker organizing the central Iowa version of the program, said it's designed for veterans who are too frail to care for themselves, but who don't want to move to a nursing home.

"We have some veterans who are living on their own because they think it's their only option, so they're hanging on by their fingernails," she said. If the foster care arrangement doesn't work out, veterans can choose to go somewhere else, including a nursing home. "It's totally up to them," she said.

People who apply to be foster families are screened for criminal backgrounds. They also undergo extensive interviews to ensure they have the necessary patience and personality. Successful applicants receive training in first aid and other basic care skills. VA nurses also help them learn specific skills they'll need to help their veterans, such as how to use a feeding tube or a lift device.

Long-term commitment

Thomas Edes, a VA administrator in Washington, D.C., who oversees the program nationally, said organizers emphasize that prospective foster families face a long-term, challenging commitment. "If you're going to be in this for a month or two to make some vacation money, we're not interested," he said.

Veterans stay with their foster families an average of nearly two years, and their medical conditions often worsen with age, Edes said. More than half stay with their foster families until they die.

Wymer, the Winterset homeowner, said he was up for the challenge. He already was caring for his aging father at home, and he decided he had room and time to help two veterans. "It's a way to give something back to these guys, who we've been taking from pretty much all their lives," he said.

Wymer, 55, has a varied resume. He's not a veteran, but he's been a car salesman and he's owned a bar, a hotel and a maintenance service. He said he's worked with disabled and elderly people in the past, and he took some occupational-therapy training several years ago.

VA inspectors made sure his house had proper emergency exits and an alarm system that would directly alert the Winterset Fire Department if there's a fire. VA staff members, including nurses, also make several visits a month to the house, sometimes unannounced. He said the agency's staff responds immediately if he calls for advice or help.

Wymer said the veterans' rent payments let him concentrate full time on their needs. "You don't go into this to get rich," he said. "It basically pays the bills - no thrills."

Veterans see benefits

Fenoglio spent 20 years in the Navy and the Marines. He served as a gunner on boats patrolling Vietnam's Mekong Delta from 1970 to 1972. Now, multiple sclerosis has left him unable to walk, and he can barely talk. He often uses an electronic keyboard to communicate.

Fenoglio said he lived for a while in a VA long-term care facility, where he felt "enslaved" by rules. When asked how his life has changed in the foster arrangement, he typed, "I am free."

He controls his own money now, and he has his own bedroom, where he keeps a prized collection of black leather motorcycle jackets. He can sit in Wymer's comfortable living room, smoking cigarettes and watching whatever TV programs he chooses. On this day, he was keeping an eye on "The Rachael Ray Show."

Marusek, an Army veteran who served in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967, moved in with Wymer in August. Chemotherapy had left him bald and weak, and he carried just 133 pounds on his 5-foot-7-inch frame. He credits his host's cooking for bringing his weight up to 164 pounds. He loves Wymer's chili, spaghetti and homemade pizza. "And ice cream," he said. "I have it every day."

Marusek has a form of lung cancer, and doctors have told him he probably has less than a year left to live. He's enrolled in a local hospice program, whose staff members add to the help he receives from Wymer and the VA. He's fixed up his bedroom with artwork and a comfortable chair, which he intends to bequeath to the next veteran who lives there after he's gone.

"It's a great place for me to spend out the time I have left," he said.

Additional Facts

Foster care information

Anyone interested in serving as a foster family for central Iowa veterans, or veterans interested in living in such an arrangement, can contact VA social worker Jan O'Briant at Janice.OBriant@va.gov or at (515) 699-5715.

