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Jeff and Janet Gilbert stand in the Aurora house that their non-profit, Hope for Tomorrow, is working to renovate for its veterans program, US Vet-Care. When it's done, the home will serve 15 veterans, but more money is needed to finish renovating the structure. | MARIANNE MATHER-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

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# Troubled vets finding Hope For Tomorrow

## Counseling agency needs help in completing second home

BY JENETTE STURGES

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AURORA — Jeff Gilbert saw a need in the community.

"During my research for my doctorate, I saw many veterans had a really hard time integrating back into society," he said. "Especially those coming back from Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, they were suffering from a lot of war-borne mental health issues because of what they experienced overseas."

So Gilbert, a substance abuse counselor, expanded the mission he'd begun more than a decade ago with Hope For Tomorrow, an Aurora-based network of recovery homes for veterans. A year and a half ago he and his wife, Janet, founded U.S. VETCare, a home in Aurora that meets the very specific needs of veterans.

Former service members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other illnesses can self-medicate, usually with alcohol and prescription opiates, said Gilbert. U.S. VetCare not only counsels them on drug issues and their underlying causes, the homes give the men the structure that's often lacking after the service.

This structured environment can be difficult to find for many, said Gilbert. The closest facility of the kind is in Wheaton, and the nearest Veterans Administration hospital is in Chicago.

"That program is going well. The average length of stay in our men's program is about 200 days," said Gilbert.

He said that 99 percent of residents at Hope For Tomorrow secure full-time employment, often within the first week of their stay when they're required to spend each day filling out a dozen applications. Residents participate in group psycho-social counseling in the evenings, and they receive individual treatment, life skills lessons and support.

Eighty-five percent of residents report that their stay is the longest and best quality period of sobriety in their lives, and, though 40 to 45 percent of men are on parole or probation when they arrive, not a single resident has committed a new crime while at Hope For Tomorrow.

When the successful eight-bed U.S. VETCare home on Hartford Avenue filed, the Gilberts began work on second facility. In April, the Gilberts and volunteers began rehabilitating a large home on North Lake Street, next door to Hope For Tomorrow's headquarters.

Expanding the U.S. VETCare program to a second house would create space for an additional 15 veterans at a time to adapt back to civilian life. It



Riders take off on the U.S. Vet Ride benefit from the Hope for Tomorrow home renovation site at 479 N. Lake St. in Aurora. | COREY R. MINKANIC-FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA



Hope for Tomorrow has been working on a new house for its veterans program, US VetCare, on Lake Street in Aurora. The needed remodeling has proved more extensive — and expensive — than was first anticipated.

would include accessible quarters for veterans with disabilities, office space for counselors, a computer lab and meeting spaces.

But the house, an 1857 brick structure, needed more tender loving care

than initially anticipated. Though the exterior work has been completed, inside the future veterans' home looks war-torn itself, made of subfloor, temporary plywood stairs, and exposed lath and plaster.

**"It's a big project for two people, but it's a smaller project for a whole community, especially as big as Aurora."**

— JEFF GILBERT, who is creating home for veterans in Aurora

"We had to bring it down to the studs," said Gilbert.

The completed project will cost \$245,000, much of which has been covered by grants or donations from organizations around Aurora, including the city of Aurora, Rebuilding Together Aurora, 708 Inc., state Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia, Alderman Stephanie Kifowit, and corporate sponsors Sears, Home Depot and Caterpillar.

Gilbert has hoped to have the facility open and serving veterans already, but right now the rehab is more or less at a standstill, and finishing the project will take another \$75,000.

In particular, they're hoping someone will come forward to sponsor the \$21,000 needed for the building's HVAC system, the \$25,000 needed for plumbing, and the \$25,000 needed to transform the basement back into a meeting room for Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs that

will be available to the wider community.

"It's a big project for two people, but it's a smaller project for a whole community, especially as big as Aurora," said Gilbert. "An old pastor of ours used to say, 'One mule can pull two tons, but two mules together can pull 23 tons, and that's a documented fact.'"

On July 23, the Gilberts tapped their biker buddies and held a motorcycle rally fundraiser, a success despite the rainy weather. And on Sept. 10, Hope For Tomorrow will host a banquet at the Gaslite Manor. In lieu of a keynote address, residents at their facilities will discuss how their recovery has shaped their lives.

"It's trying at times, but rewarding all the time," said Gilbert. "Chasing the funding, getting the support, that's the trying part. But seeing the change in people, that's a gift we're able to see every day."