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'Operation Hero Miles' expands to families of wounded soldiers

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American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Alice Rodgers, a single mother, paid more than \$1,000 for round-trip tickets from Tipton, Iowa, so she and her daughter, Lindsey, could visit her son, who is recuperating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center here from wounds he suffered in an ambush in Iraq.

However, when Rodgers returns for her next visit, the trip will be far less expensive -- it will cost her nothing.

During a press briefing today at the front gate of the hospital, Maryland Rep. C.A. "Dutch" Ruppersberger handed 680 free airline tickets to David Coker, executive director and vice president of operations at the Fisher House Foundation [<http://fisherhouse.org/>], a nonprofit organization that provides temporary living quarters to military families visiting loved ones at military hospitals.

The congressman said the free airline tickets are part of a new expansion of "Operation Hero Miles," a program he created to provide airline tickets to troops on emergency or rest and recuperation leave.

He said the program now includes free airline tickets to family members traveling to visit loved ones injured during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and recovering at military hospitals throughout the country.

"We decided to expand this program even farther, because our program is about helping the troops -- the men and women who are putting their lives on the line for our freedom and liberty in Iraq and Afghanistan," Ruppersberger said, adding that having family close by helps the healing process.

The tickets were compliments of Anheuser-Busch, whose employees donated their frequent-flier miles to the cause. Ruppersberger said that so far, more than 365 million frequent-flyer miles have been donated to Operation Hero Miles, enough for some 14,800 free round-trip tickets for troops.

Coker said the Fisher House Foundation, which operates 32 Fisher Houses throughout the United States and overseas, will use the free tickets to help reunite wounded and injured service members with their loved ones.

He said 16 Fisher Houses at 12 locations have supported families of troops injured during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. "It's not uncommon for a family to stay in more than one Fisher House as they follow their loved ones through the medical evacuation chain," he said.

He said room charges for family members have been waived or paid by the foundation, and that in the past the foundation also has helped to provide travel for some families.

Rodgers left her job to come to Walter Reed shortly after her son, Spc. Joe Gottschalk, arrived here Dec. 4.

Gottschalk, of the 2133rd Transportation Unit, Iowa National Guard, was wounded in an ambush on his convoy near the Syrian border Nov. 29, the day after his birthday. Gottschalk was shot in the head; the bullet entered the back of his neck and shattered his jaw. His close hometown friend, Sgt. Aaron Sissel, riding alongside him, was killed. The sergeant's mother, Jo Sissel, wearing a button with her son's photo, said that although since her son's death she is no longer considered part of the military, she hopes to benefit from the program. She and daughter Shanna also paid large sums for their tickets to Washington, coming here to lend support to the Rodgers family.

The two mothers, who have been staying at Walter Reed's Fisher House, agree the free airline tickets surely mean a lot. "There need to be more programs like this to help people," Rodgers said. "I'm not working. I had to leave my job to come see my son and be with him, so it's hard. But this is a good program."

According to a Fisher House news release, Fisher House Foundation has donated 32 comfort homes on the grounds of military and VA medical centers for families to stay at while a loved one is hospitalized, and the Foundation assists these families during their stay. Fisher House Foundation asked Congressman Ruppertsberger if the Hero Miles program could be expanded to include travel for hospitalized service members and their families, and the Congressman enthusiastically agreed. When Anheuser-Busch offered to donate hundreds of airline tickets, all agreed that these tickets were the ideal solution to help families reunite with their loved ones while they were being treated for an injury or illness from their service in the combat zone.

The donated airline tickets will be available to relatives or friends of inpatients as identified by the wounded or injured service members and validated by the medical center staff. Family members should not contact the Fisher House Foundation, but should make their desires known to the hospitalized service member. The program includes complimentary airline tickets only. There are no provisions for assistance with local travel, overnight accommodations, meals, or other expenses, officials said.