

Local cities waive fee to help build veteran housing

May 19, 2014

As Memorial Day approaches, we are reminded of the great sacrifices made by so many Americans to preserve our freedoms. And we commend our Inland Empire cities for making it easier for charities to build homes for disabled veterans.

Homes for Our Troops is a Massachusetts-based group that builds 30 to 35 homes a year across America for severely disabled veterans. Current projects include homes for 14 California vets, including two in Murrieta, one in Corona, one in Yucaipa and one in Fallbrook.

Fortunately, local governments in recent weeks have worked to help this group and others. The 17 cities that form the Western Riverside Council of Governments have acted, individually as cities, to eliminate about \$8,800 in fees assessed whenever a new home is built by a non-profit group for a disabled veteran. These Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fees fund local transportation projects administered by the council of governments.

After the Temecula City Council passed its fee waiver last week, the Press-Enterprise reported, "In recent years, the Temecula Valley, including Wine Country and parts of Murrieta, have become a welcoming haven for injured veterans." Living is cheaper here than in other areas of California; and the nearby VA Loma Linda Healthcare System is one of four VA Medical Centers in California that offer comprehensive coverage.

And as recent congressional hearings have shown, many disabled veterans need to be treated better through reforms of Veterans' Administration hospitals. So expected national reforms should dovetail with these commendable local efforts.

The overall fees — which are for schools and environmental permits as well as transportation — cost \$40,000 to \$50,000 for each home, Kristi Galanek told us; she's Home for Our Troops' director of marketing. "So to eliminate \$8,000 to \$9,000 of those fees, we can put that into a building another home for another veteran."

The group has a waiting list that extends to 2016. Without the fee, she said, "We can hopefully move someone from 2016 to 2015 and build a home sooner." She said her group only helps severely disabled veterans, "mostly those who are double and quadruple amputees, who are paralyzed. So it's usually the veterans who will spend the majority of their time in a wheelchair."

Getting rid of the fee will particularly help reduce the extra cost of building these homes, each of which has 155 special adaptations. A fact sheet from the organization listed such adaptations as

wider door frames, roll-under counter tops, automatic doors, single level/open floor plans, roll-in showers and lower cabinet heights.

Part of the construction problem, of course, is the general high cost of housing in California. A 2007 analysis by Randal O'Toole of the libertarian Cato Institute found, "The most affordable housing market in California is less affordable than 90 percent of the other housing markets in the U.S. ... Under the mantra of 'stopping sprawl,' urban planners have crammed nearly 95 percent of Californians into just 5.1 percent of the state's land area."

America's four densest urban areas all are in California. The Riverside-San Bernardino area is somewhat better, at 34th densest. Dealing with such problems in general is an editorial for another day. But it's worth remembering that the problems resulting from bad land policies — such as long commutes to and from cheaper bedroom communities — hurt disabled veterans even more than the rest of us. It's harder for a vet in a wheelchair to travel long distances in a car or public transportation.

In a speech last August to a convention of the Disabled American Veterans Convention in Florida, President Barack Obama said, "You know, from hard experience, what we must never forget — our country endures because in every generation there are Americans like you who stand beside her and guide her and protect her."

Kudos to our local cities for helping these veterans. And on Memorial Day, all of us should thank a vet.