FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

(FONSI)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

PROPOSED DEMOLITION OF BUILDING 14 AND CONSTRUCTION AND OPERATION OF A FISHER HOUSE

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS CONNECTICUT HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

WEST HAVEN MEDICAL CENTER

950 CAMPBELL AVENUE

WEST HAVEN, NEW HAVEN COUNTY, CONNECTICUT
BACKGROUND

The VA Connecticut Healthcare System (VACHS), West Haven Medical Center (West Haven VAMC), is a 47-acre campus in a highly urbanized area, located at 950 Campbell Avenue, West Haven, New Haven County, Connecticut. The West Haven VAMC was originally established in 1916 as the William Wirt Winchester Hospital for the treatment of tuberculosis patients. Following the end of World War II, VA acquired the hospital and transitioned it to a general medical care facility. Currently, the West Haven VAMC is an inpatient facility and Ambulatory Care Center providing medical services and patient care to thousands of Veterans in Connecticut each year.

However, no free on-site lodging is available for the families and caregivers of Veterans and Active Duty Service members hospitalized at the West Haven VAMC. Accordingly, in 2007, the VACHS identified the West Haven VAMC as a priority site for a Fisher House. A Fisher House is “a home away from home,” providing an on-site no-cost lodging option for these family members and caregivers. Fisher Houses provide the opportunity for family members and caregivers to be actively involved in their loved one’s treatment plan, supporting positive clinical outcomes and access to medical care for those Veterans that would not be willing to travel for care without support from family. Families can prepare meals together, do their laundry, relax with a book from the library, watch TV or a DVD, play games, utilize the internet, and visit with other families supporting a sense of normalcy during a very challenging time. Fisher Houses offer a comfortable environment where families can come together to provide support for one another, and establish a peer support network that continues long after the episode of care for the veteran concludes.

Since 1990, the Fisher House Foundation has funded construction of 65 Fisher Houses across the nation, all near military hospitals or VA facilities. These Fisher Houses have been used by over 250,000 families who have stayed more than 5.8 million days, saving a combined $282 million in hotel and transportation costs. However, there are no Fisher Houses or similar facilities provided by the VACHS where this benefit is available in Connecticut.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION and ALTERNATIVES

Between 2007 and 2016, the VACHS and the Fisher House Foundation began the scoping process for a Proposed Action to establish a Fisher House at the West Haven VAMC. Under the Proposed Action, the Fisher House Foundation would fund the construction of the Fisher House; following construction, it would be owned, operated, staffed, and maintained by the VACHS. The most suitable location for the Fisher House was a 0.57-acre area in the southeastern portion of the West Haven VAMC, currently occupied by “Building 14,” an approximately 5,500-square foot, 2-story building.
constructed in 1916 and used as the Learning Recovery Center. Building 14 was identified as a contributing feature to an eligible National Register of Historic Places historic district encompassing the West Haven VAMC. Building 14 has been confirmed to contain asbestos and lead-based paint, and, based on its age, may also contain polychlorinated biphenyl-contaminated building materials. Accordingly, constructing the Fisher House in this area would require abatement of these regulated building materials followed by demolition of Building 14. The loss of Building 14 would result in an adverse effect to the historic property.

Accordingly, a second phase of the Proposed Action is to implement the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) executed in December 2016 to mitigate for this adverse effect (the loss of Building 14). The MOA stipulated that the VACHS will complete window restoration at Buildings 5 and 9 (also contributing features); and within five years, relocate the ornate West Haven VAMC entrance gate (also a contributing feature) from Campbell Avenue to a new location at the West Haven VAMC and restore the gate as a non-functioning historical exhibit; if not done within five years, the gate will be restored in place.

The Fisher House project would also eliminate 24 parking spaces located at the western end of Veterans Drive, currently used by staff and patients at the West Haven VAMC. To offset this loss of parking, the VACHS identified a third phase of the Proposed Action, which would involve developing an approximately 0.46-acre area in the norther portion of the West Haven VAMC into a parking lot with approximately 65 spaces. The need to implement this third phase would be determined in the future by the VACHS and would be based upon parking conditions at that future time. The third phase would be implemented if this proposed northern parking lot was needed to alleviate on-site parking shortages.

Accordingly, the Proposed Action includes these three phases; however, should the first phase not occur (demolition of Building 14 and construction and operation of the Fisher House), the second and third phases would not occur under this Proposed Action.

The VACHS also considered a No Action alternative, whereby conditions as they currently exist at the West Haven VAMC would be maintained. No changes to infrastructure described under the Proposed Action would occur. The No Action alternative represents baseline conditions by which the potential impacts of the Proposed Action can be better evaluated.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to construct and operate a Fisher House, “a home away from home,” in order to provide an on-site no-cost lodging option for the family members and caregivers of Veterans and Active Duty Service members hospitalized at
the West Haven VAMC. The Proposed Action is needed because this benefit is not currently available at the West Haven VAMC or elsewhere in Connecticut, requiring an estimated 500 families per year to spend thousands of dollars on off-site lodging costs while their family member is hospitalized.

Accordingly, the Proposed Action is the preferred action alternative. Under the No Action alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented, current conditions at the West Haven VAMC would remain unchanged, and the purpose and need for on-site no-cost lodging identified above would not be met.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

An Environmental Assessment (EA), incorporated herein by reference, was prepared to identify, analyze, and document the potential physical, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts associated with the Proposed Action and the No Action alternative. Specifically, the EA evaluated potential impacts caused by the Proposed Action and the No Action alternative on environmental resources including: aesthetics; air quality; cultural resources; geology and soils; hydrology and water quality; wildlife and habitat, including threatened and endangered species; noise; land use; floodplains, wetlands, and coastal zone management; socioeconomics; community services; solid and hazardous materials; transportation and parking; utilities; alternative energy sources; environmental justice and the potential for generating substantial public controversy.

The EA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 ([NEPA]; 42 United States Code [USC] 4321 et seq.), the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508), VA's NEPA implementing regulations, 38 CFR Part 26 (Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions), and VA's “NEPA Interim Guidance for Projects” (VA 2010).

As documented in the EA, the VA concludes that no significant adverse impact, either individually or cumulatively, directly or indirectly, over a short- or long-term period, would result from implementing the Proposed Action, because the Proposed Action includes mitigation for historic preservation as well as minimization and avoidance measures to further ensure impacts are maintained at or below less-than-significant adverse levels. Additionally, the Proposed Action would have a long-term beneficial impact on community services, as it would provide an economic and social benefit to Veterans’ families and care givers through on-site, no-cost lodging while the Veteran is hospitalized at the West Haven VAMC. This beneficial impact would not occur under the No Action alternative.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
The EA public involvement process including letters soliciting input from federal, state, and local regulatory agencies, and Native American Tribal representatives. This consultation was documented in the Draft EA. Concerns expressed by pertinent regulatory agencies and Native American Tribes were addressed and incorporated during development of the Draft EA. The Draft EA was subsequently published, distributed to the West Haven Public Library in hardcopy and electronically on the VA’s Connecticut website. The availability of the Draft EA and the start of a 30-day public comment period was announced in a Notice of Availability (NOA), which was published in the New Haven Register on November 13, 14, and 15, 2016. Additionally, a public meeting to inform the public about the Proposed Action and the NEPA process was held at the West Haven Public Library on November 17, 2016. The meeting was also announced in the NOA. Furthermore, letters were mailed to regulatory agencies and Native American Tribes requesting input on the Draft EA during the 30-day comment period and inviting them to attend the public meeting.

One comment was received during the public meeting, which expressed support for the Proposed Action and reiterated that the VACHS should implement best management practices to limit dust generation on public roadways during the Fisher House construction period. This communication is documented in the Final EA. No other concerns or comments from the public or pertinent regulatory agencies or Native American Tribes were received at the public meeting or during the 30-day comment period on the Draft EA that were directly related to the analysis in the Draft EA. Therefore, no substantive changes to the Draft EA were required to prepare the Final EA.

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)**

As a result of the analysis of impacts in the Final EA, summarized and incorporated by reference herein, it is the conclusion of the VA that, with the implementation of aforementioned mitigation for historic preservation, minimization and management measures, and regulatory compliance measures included in the Final EA, the Proposed Action would not cause a significant impact of an adverse nature on the quality of the natural or human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Therefore, per the NEPA, the CEQ regulations, and 38 CFR Part 26, I am signing this FONSI. Therefore, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Action is not required.
Reviewed by:

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