

Homeless veterans center gets boost

■ VA grant to help remodel interior.

By **JOSEPH DITS**
Tribune Staff Writer

SOUTH BEND — The innards of the commercial building at 747 S. Michigan St. aren't much more than four walls and a floor of concrete, brick and dirt.

Judge Robert L. Miller Sr. dreams of making it a haven for veterans to sleep and shake off personal demons that made them homeless.

A grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs just recently came in for \$305,500. That now allows the Center for the Homeless to move ahead with remodeling, said center Director Steve Camilleri.

The grant will bear much



Tribune Photo/PAUL RAKESTRAW

The Center for the Homeless brighten the building at 747 S. Michigan St., South Bend, that will become the Robert L. Miller Sr. Veteran's Center.

of the half-million dollar cost of the work, he said.

Next year's dedication of the new Robert L. Miller Sr. Veteran's Center has already been set for Veterans Day, on 11/11/11.

Miller, who turns 90 this

December, is a local retired judge and retired lieutenant commander of the U.S. Naval Reserves.

He said calls still are coming in for Miller's Vets, a group he started for homeless veterans early in

2009, to dress up in military uniforms and perform at Veterans Day ceremonies this year — five gigs so far Nov. 10 and 11, plus more on the Sunday before, Miller said. The idea is that male and female veterans renew the sense of pride and discipline they once had in the military.

Some of them play their ceremonial roles with fake rifles. Federal law bans them from touching a gun if they have a felony on their records, Miller explained.

He bought the building at 747 S. Michigan St. last year from L.C. Typesetting Co. and gave it to the Center for the Homeless. Over the next year, Camilleri said, the center will craft programs that cater to veteran issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder. He said it fits with the center's strategic plan to cus-

tomize care for its guests.

The new center will have 25 beds for male veterans. It will be open to other veterans, men and women, who stay in the main shelter of the Center for the Homeless a few steps away at 813 S. Michigan St., Camilleri said.

Out of at least 200 guests at the main shelter on any night, 35 to 40 of them tend to be veterans, officials say. The grant also will pay for a 12-passenger van to drive veterans to events, to the doctor and to other appointments, Camilleri said.

He said the center is seeking Veterans Affairs funding to help with operational costs, which could be \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year. The center will raise funds for an endowment to help with daily costs, too.

Miller's Vets draws nine to 12 veterans at a time for ceremonies, though alto-

gether there have been more than 20, Miller said.

Many of the veterans are getting jobs and moving ahead with their lives, Miller said, but some are relapsing to their old addictions.

"The thing that had them out there (on the streets) to begin with is so strong," he said.

The group has developed a training video so that groups outside of this area can learn how this unique group pulls together its ceremonies, Miller said. At the same time, Miller's Vets is organizing a cemetery with 60 plots near Portage Manor on the city's northwest side to provide burial for veterans who can't afford it.

Staff writer Joseph Dits:
jdits@sbtinfo.com
574-235-6158