

Veterans Day

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Just for the veterans

Center nearly ready for homeless

By **JOSEPH DITS**
South Bend Tribune

SOUTH BEND — “Nothing like the eleventh hour,” Mark Scott exhales, pocketing his cell phone.

The concrete will come, but not for another few days. It is one week ago, and Scott is stepping around half-finished jobs in an old commercial building that, for two years, volunteers like him have been turning into a shelter for homeless veterans.

This morning, on Veterans Day, on 11-11-11, about 300 invited guests and public officials will dedicate the Robert L. Miller, Sr. Veteran’s Center.

Organizers had aimed to make this opening day, but it probably won’t be until December when the first homeless veterans can check in and claim a bed, said Steve Camilleri, director of the Center for the Homeless, of which it will be a part. There will be room for 25 men. Most of the first guests will be the male veterans — 20 to 30 on any given night — who already are staying at the Center for the Homeless, Camilleri said.

For now, physical details and inspections await.

“It looks like we’re far away (from finish), but a lot of this stuff will go very quickly,” said Scott, owner of Mark Scott Homes, who has served as construction manager.

The new center sits at 747 S. Michigan St., next to the Center for



South Bend Tribune Photos/MARCUS MARTER

ABOVE: Construction manager Mark Scott arranges military plaques for the Robert L. Miller, Sr. Veteran’s Center in South Bend. **BELOW:** The main lounge in the new veterans center, seen here on Wednesday, looks out on the garden at the Center for the Homeless in South Bend.

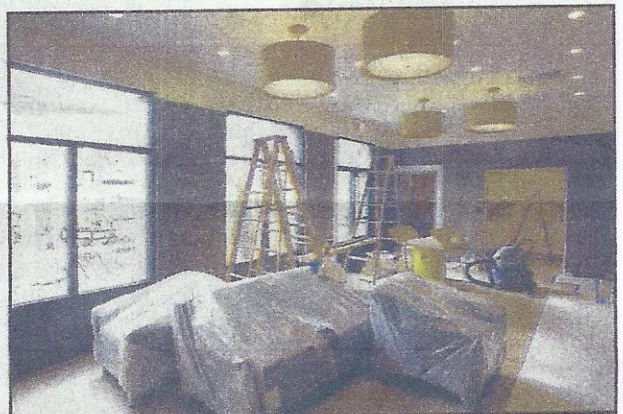
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the Homeless.

Deep, manly colors of paint cover the walls inside. And there's a tiny room behind the front desk where a drunken veteran would first sober up before being admitted. This differs from the "zero tolerance" at the main shelter, where no one can be admitted while he or she is under the influence, Camilleri said.

"The new facility might draw out a lot of the folks who wouldn't necessarily want to stay at the Center (for the Homeless)," he said.

A lounge in the middle has picture windows that look upon the Center for the Homeless garden and patio.

Guests would eat all of their meals and take part in regular programming next door in the main building.

The Veteran's Center would have its own staff, director and "coach," the center's term for a caseworker. The coach would be a clinical therapist who could provide therapy for the guests, said Angela Willson, director of center initiatives at the Center for the Homeless.

The new center would target veterans who are medically fragile, who have mental illness and who abuse drugs or alcohol, she said.

See VETERANS/A2

FROM PAGE A1

Veterans: New center nearly done

Volunteer labor

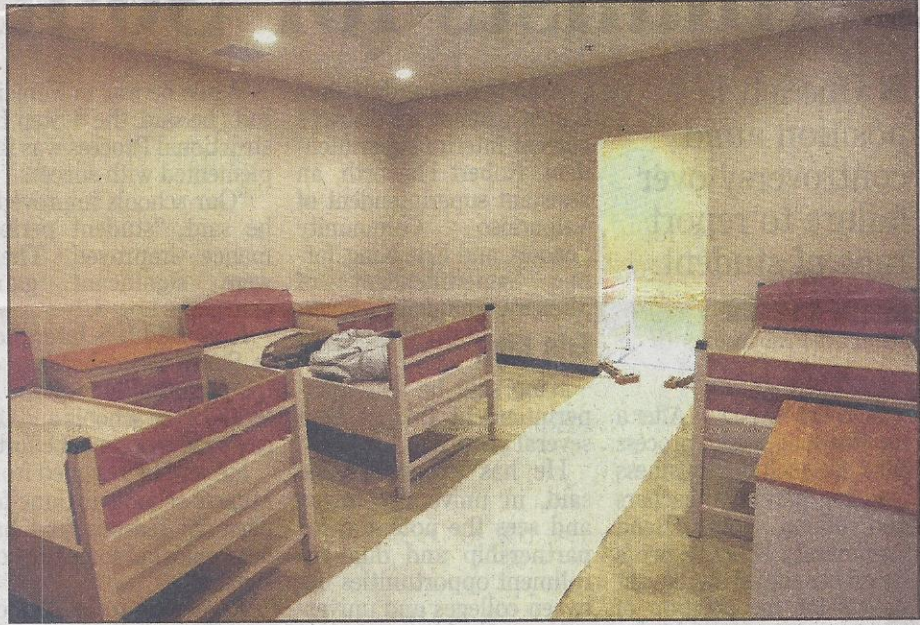
In September 2009, volunteers started to gut the musty, leaky building, Scott said. They ripped out old walls so new rooms could be designed. Then the helpers took five months off until funding was secured.

Camilleri called the renovation "upwards of a million-dollar project," a lot of which has been covered by donated help. Scott said from 80 percent to 90 percent of the labor has been donated, with most of it coming from fellow members at Granger Community Church. That, plus the volunteer help of architects Kevin and Aimee Buccellato and skilled laborers, is all worth more than \$65,000 over the past two years, Willson said.

A lot of suppliers donated materials or sold them at cost. Scott said it wasn't hard to beg for it: "People want to help."

He also knew people from when the church transformed some old storefronts on Western Avenue into the Monroe Circle Community Center a few years ago.

This renovation is supported by a \$305,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which also was used to buy a van to transport veterans.



South Bend Tribune/MARCUS MARTER

This is one of the bedrooms in the works at the Robert L. Miller, Sr. Veteran's Center in South Bend.

The city of South Bend gave \$50,000 for the project, too, Willson said.

Veterans Affairs also will provide up to \$28.90 per veteran per day, which will pay part of the operating costs, she said. The Center for the Homeless will have to raise another \$75,000 to \$100,000 to run the center each year, Camilleri said.

One man's vision

Robert L. Miller Sr., the 90-year-old who bought the building for the center, coined his own adjective for the veterans: DOL. Down on their luck.

The retired judge and retired lieutenant commander of the U.S. Naval Reserves started Miller's Vets, a group of homeless vets who dress in military gear and do military drills and ceremonies. He's set

up a cemetery plot for DOL vets, too. Now he foresees teams of four volunteers who would track down DOL veterans, take them to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles and get them identification cards that verify they are veterans.

"I won't rest until they're all registered," he said.

Then he said he hopes local businesses would jump in to support the veterans who present the ID cards with, for example, a two-for-one deal at a fast-food restaurant.

"I don't know a mer-

chant that doesn't want to help veterans," Miller said. "The trouble is: They don't know who they are."

This past spring, Miller said, the University of Notre Dame invited 10 alumni associations across Indiana to clone the Miller's Vets programs in their communities. As he explains this, he dreams of seeing it spread across the country — and his eyes well up with tears.

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