

FIREfighting

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FEBRUARY 2025

IN CANADA

A large fire is burning at night, with bright orange and yellow flames rising from a dark structure. A drone is flying in the air above the fire, silhouetted against the bright light. The background is a dark, smoky sky.

FIRE CHIEFS TALK TECH

What working and what's on the wish list

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HOMES AWAY FROM HOME

Short-term housing for firefighters in need

Like fighting a fire, fighting an illness brings a host of stressful unknowns, especially when you or a family member require medical treatment far from home. A surge of worries arises: “What will we do?” “Where will we stay?” “How will we afford this?” Fortunately, six non-profit Canadian organizations offer welcoming, short-term, low-cost lodgings for first responders, military personnel, veterans, and their families. Guests need simply pack personal effects and food and focus on recovery with loved ones close by. While these havens are neither treatment centres nor staffed by medical personnel, they foster healing through empathetic support and a sense of community. Here are their stories.

HONOURING BRAVERY

Brutally attacked by an axe-wielding assailant in Afghanistan, Captain Trevor Greene of Vancouver’s Seaforth Highlanders had been deployed there in 2006. His miraculous recovery was documented in the Gemini award-winning film “Peace Warrior”. Watching the soldier and his family struggle to find and pay for accommodation while seeking medical attention deeply moved Vancouver businessman Allan De Genova, so much so that the community leader established Honour House Society to offer free lodging at Honour House to ease the suffering of members of the Canadian Armed Forces, veterans, first responders, and their loved ones requiring medical care.

Situated on a quiet, residential street in New Westminister, a suburb east of Vancouver, the 1937 Georgian-style mansion-turned-care home

RIGHT Benji, a yellow Labrador and operational stress intervention dog, promotes well-being at Home Away, a facility housed in the BC Professional Firefighters’ Association Burn Fund Centre.



has retained its connection to the past through elegant parquet flooring, plasterwork, and fireplaces. In addition to 11 bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, the renovated oasis offers a shared kitchen, living room, two sunrooms and other common areas, as well as spacious, landscaped grounds. Guests also have access to a book and DVD library, large flat screen television and video games.

“Our guests are incredibly happy to use the facility,” said House staff Curt Appleby, who adds, “We always stress that we’re here to help their families as well.”

And in 2010, who declared Honour House open? It was none other than Captain Trevor Greene.

SALUTING VALOUR

While the health struggles of Canadian Forces’ members and their loved ones in Edmonton didn’t make it to the silver screen, they too inspired a local business leader and visionary to seek change. During a visit at a local hospital years ago, Dennis Erker, then honorary colonel of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, was disheartened to learn of the costly, trying and often lonely path to recovery experienced by members. In 2012, Erker founded Valour Place in the Alberta capital. Since its inception, it has provided 30,000 bed nights at no cost.

In addition to 12 ensuite bedrooms, on offer in the Prairie art-filled lodging are a communal kitchen, family room with a TV, movies and video games. “Valour Place provides all the comforts of home,” said executive director Sylvie Keane. The facilities include desktop computers, children’s playroom, crafts area, fitness equipment and a library. Foosball, shuffleboard, pool and air hockey tables offer fun diversions. Plus, guests can enjoy time outdoors in the fenced backyard which is complete with a swing play park.

“Families are not isolated, like staying in a hotel. They have other people in the house to lean on while going through their medical journey,” noted Keane.

NURTURING HOME

As part of that journey, one refuge in Vancouver offers the companionship of a friendly furry host. Benji, a yellow Labrador and operational stress intervention dog, promotes well-being at Home Away, a facility housed in the BC Professional Firefighters’ Association Burn Fund Centre. “When we have guests struggling, we take Benji to comfort them,” said Peter Hansen, the canine’s owner, manager of Home Away, and former captain at the North Vancouver District Fire Department.

The retired Hansen recounts how this haven was the result of a meeting held years ago by the BC Professional Fire Fighters’ Burn Fund, which was founded in 1978 by the BC Professional Firefighters’ Association and aids burn victims across B.C. and the Yukon. “We were asked to dream big, regardless of cost,” he recalled. Since opening in 2016, Home Away has served as a model for other firefighter groups.

While priority is given to burn and trauma survivors—who made up 60 to 65 per cent of the facility’s guests in 2023 — Home Away offers firefighters and their families eight ensuite bedrooms, a communal kitchen, living area, and patio. A nominal fee ranging from \$25-\$50 per night is requested.

“Guests are just so thankful. And we try to support families as much as

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possible by bringing in previous guests, having a social worker sit and talk with them, and providing a long list of trauma-informed counsellors,” added Hansen.

SUPPORTING HEROES

While a canine provides friendly support at one lodging, on the other side of the country it’s a veteran at the accommodation operated in partnership with Killam Apartments by the Society of Atlantic Heroes in Fall River, a suburb of Halifax. “He drops by, makes guests feel comfortable, shares his story, asks about their story...and lets folks know we all need help,” explained president Tim Brodie, a veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force and counselling therapist.

Heavy on the heart of another veteran and retired captain of the Royal Canadian Navy, Ken Hoffer, were his fellow veterans who were struggling with PTSD. So, in 2013, Hoffer established this temporary retreat for former and current military personnel, as well as first responders. In 2023, thirty-seven families stayed at the three-bedroom apartment which is free of charge and has, “...everything they need to continue being a family,” said Brodie, who noted, “Firefighters have been real stalwarts of support for us...Our dream down the road is to have an apartment in each of the Atlantic provinces.”

STRENGTHENING LEGACIES

In the western province of Alberta, Legacy Place Society offers a transitional home in quiet neighborhoods in each of the three largest cities: Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer. In response to a disturbing trend of suicides and other difficulties experienced in the first responder

ABOVE Honour House has 11 bedrooms.

RIGHT Valour Place has provided 30,000 bed nights at no cost since its founding in 2012.

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These are six non-profit Canadian organizations offer welcoming, short-term, low-cost lodgings for first responders, military personnel, veterans, and their families.

and military communities, a group of Alberta police officers founded the organization in 1997. The vision of Legacy Place Society is to strengthen individual and family resilience, empowering them to effectively navigate the challenges they face.

“We handle more than medical situations. We include domestic, evictions and confidential safety situations,” explained executive director Diana Festejo, who added that they offer an “...immediate turnaround response to [those] seeking accommodations.”

Safe and confidential, these welcoming sanctuaries are conveniently located near hospitals, playgrounds, and shopping centres. They include a communal kitchen and a variety of puzzles, toys, and board games. A nominal fee of \$15 per night/room is requested.

HOUSING CHAMPIONS

Also offering a more secluded environment in a residential neighborhood in which to heal is Winch House. Free of charge, the four-bedroom, three-bathroom townhouse is in a Vancouver family housing complex. Operated by New Chelsea Society, a non-profit housing society founded in the 1950’s by Vancouver branches of the Royal Canadian Legion, the organization offered veterans affordable housing. Since then, it has introduced accommodation for families and seniors.

After a staff member checks guests in and provides them with a contact number, they are left to themselves to enjoy some privacy, said Ivani Chand, manager of accounting and resident placement. She noted: “We have had many firefighters visit in the past with their spouses and children for medical appointments and procedures.”

Perhaps you and your family are in good health now. But, as Appleby emphasizes during his presentations, “We encourage them to keep us in mind for the future. They may not need us now, but who knows what could happen later?” In the meantime, there are plenty of ways to contribute to these non-profit organizations who are working tirelessly to end the narrative of stressful unknowns for firefighters and their families facing a health crisis.

Andrea Perchotte is a Vancouver-based wellness spaces educator, writer, speaker, and founder of Exploring Wellness. With a background as a sleep and health coach who holds a Bachelor of Education and diploma in interior design, she has experience in the hotel industry and crafting soothing commercial spaces. Andrea educates professionals on restorative wellness spaces and restful sleep environments to promote optimal health and well-being.

PHOTOS: ANDREA PERCHOTTE