

Temporary homes and needed help could be on the way for area homeless veterans.

The Christian Worship Center, a faith-based social service group, this week received a \$1.89 million grant to build a new shelter for homeless veterans in Omaha.

The money will go toward a 26-unit transitional living facility, called New Visions Center, near 16th and Nicholas Streets.

"For us, there's nothing worse than seeing a veteran who's given his life in service to his country . . . being homeless," said the Rev. Harry Wallar, founder of the Council Bluffs group.

The grant was a portion of \$36.7 million awarded to community groups throughout the country by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The projects will create an estimated 1,526 new beds for homeless veterans nationwide.

Wallar worked with Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., the Nebraska Western Iowa office of the VA and Central States Development, an affordable housing developer, to secure the grant.

"The Omaha area has a large number of veterans who are unfortunately homeless and down and out," Terry said. "This money will go a long way in reducing the number of veterans without a home and get them back on their feet to productive members of society."

About 165 veterans in Omaha are homeless each night, said Linda Twomey, grants liaison for the local VA office. Nationwide, that number is about 154,000.

The grant will pay about 65 percent of the estimated \$2.9 million cost of the planned facility. The shelter will feature 26 individual units, each featuring a small living room, bedroom, bathroom and kitchenette. It will be north of downtown Omaha on the social services campus that includes the Siena-Francis House and the Catholic Charities Omaha Campus of Hope, which specializes in alcohol and drug abuse treatment.

Veterans will be able to stay up to two years, while they go through treatment and rehabilitation programs. That will include work with a therapist, as well as eight- to 10-week courses on such things as work ethics. Residents will be expected to find jobs.

The treatment could include help for ailments common among some veterans, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. About 70 percent of homeless veterans abuse drugs or alcohol, and about half have major mental illness, said Twomey.

Before veterans leave the facility, they will receive help finding permanent housing, Wallar said.

"The goal in transitional living is to reintegrate them into society," said Wallar. "We want them to become self-sufficient as soon as possible."

Plans for the Omaha shelter are coming together just as the Christian Worship Center has launched a similar project, also called New Visions Center, in Council Bluffs. That \$3 million center, at North 15th Street and Avenue M, includes a 40-bed men's shelter and a 26-unit transitional housing facility for men and women. That shelter is open to all homeless people, not just veterans.

Wallar has operated MOHM's Place, a Council Bluffs meal center, for 14 years. The meal center has been incorporated into the new Council Bluffs shelter. Construction of the Omaha facility is expected to begin in spring 2009.

