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Maryland's Former Marines Organize Visits To Wounded

CUMBERLAND, Md. -- It's a long way to the National Naval Medical Center for Marines wounded in Iraq, but it's a relatively short drive for former Marines living in Maryland who voluntarily visit the wounded at the hospital in Bethesda.

Marine Corps League members from Cumberland, about 130 miles away, have been making such trips for more than a year under a program called Marines Helping Wounded Marines.

"To me, it's something that makes you feel like you've really done something," said Vic Ryan, commandant of the organization's local chapter, the Mountainside Marine Detachment.

He said the program started with an e-mail from the state commandant asking if any league members were available to visit a wounded Marine from Florida who was recovering in Bethesda. Marines and sailors wounded in Iraq are flown to Germany and then to Andrews Air Force Base before arriving at the medical center in Maryland.

The program aims to provide emotional and material support to the injured. Patients' families also are grateful for the visits, Ryan told the *Cumberland Times-News*.

"You feel appreciated, and you see the parents thanking you. At the same time, you feel very sad to see their injured son or daughter but their attitudes are just so good and positive," he said.

Paul and Flo Lease have made several trips to the hospital since last year. Paul Lease, who served as a Marine in the Korean War, said visitors are instructed not to cry but to just sit and talk with the patients.

"They're so glad to see people," he said. "People couldn't believe we came all the way from Cumberland just to visit with them."