

Historic Preservation Supporting Veterans Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center Leavenworth, Kansas

In 1886, when the Western Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers was built in Leavenworth, Kansas, it was the only veterans' care facility west of the Mississippi River. Built on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River, it is now a National Historic Landmark (NHL). Along with ten other Branches, it represents the beginnings of the nation's health care system for volunteer soldiers and sailors. The buildings are in Georgian and Romanesque Revival architectural styles and are surrounded by a designed landscape. A stained glass window of Abraham Lincoln donated by the Grand Army of the Republic adds to the unique character of the site and links it to the era of its origin. The Branch's cemetery expanded over time to become the Leavenworth National Cemetery. The campus today has 100 buildings, both modern and historic, on approximately 343 acres. Together with their landscaping, 54 of the buildings comprise the NHL district.

By 1999, much of the medical portion of the campus had fallen into disuse, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) considered demolishing 38 of its historic buildings to expand the National Cemetery. Under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, VA consulted with the Leavenworth County Historical Society, the Kansas Preservation Alliance, the Preservation Association of Leavenworth, the Kansas State Historic Preservation Office, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to find ways to preserve and use these buildings. In the end, the cemetery expansion provided burial options to veterans for thirty years without destroying any historic buildings.



Abraham Lincoln Window, 1887
Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center, Leavenworth, KS

In 2005, preservation of the 38 buildings was ensured when VA entered into a 75-year Enhanced-Use Lease (EUL) with Pioneer Group's Eisenhower Ridge Association, of Topeka, KS. The EUL allowed these formerly threatened buildings to be rehabilitated for affordable housing, offices, and other related uses.



Building 19, 1886, before (above) and after (below) renovation for the VA Central Plains Consolidated Account Center
Dwight D. Eisenhower VA Medical Center, Leavenworth, KS



Pioneer Group started by renovating 16 buildings and opened Eisenhower Ridge Apartments in 2006. This was followed by converting dilapidated Building 19, the 1886 mess hall, into modern and efficient offices for the Central Plains Consolidated Account Center (CPAC) in 2011. The historic, large open area provides flexible space for 400 VA employees. The project won multiple awards, including a national Preservation Honor Award in 2012.

In May, 2014, a ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the opening of Ridge Top Apartments, the third phase of Pioneer Group's development. As of early 2015, a total of 24 buildings have been rehabilitated, creating over 90 occupied 1 and 2-bedroom apartments. In cooperation with VA, the developer plans to rehabilitate the remainder of the buildings over time and is receiving federal and state tax credits for its sensitive rehabilitation.

The campus rehabilitation efforts benefit VA, the veterans it serves, and the public. VA is no longer responsible for using antiquated buildings in its program of modern medical care, or with maintaining underutilized buildings, and can redirect funding to other operating expenses and services. Homeless and at risk of homeless veterans are housed with dignity, in close proximity to their main source of medical services. The developer's ongoing renovation and preservation relieves taxpayers of the cost of maintaining unneeded federal buildings, without suffering the loss of valued historic assets.