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U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor plays air hockey with Army Spc. Jeffery Scott Jr., 23, who has been at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital since February, when he fell and injured his head. HOWARD ALTMAN/STAFF

Army Spc. Jeffery Scott Jr., his wheelchair tucked under the new air hockey table, smiles as the little green plastic disk comes whizzing toward him, fired, no less, by a member of Congress.

"It's good for him to get out of his room," says his mother, Patrice Harris, who is also smiling as she watches her son's impromptu match with Kathy Castor.

Scott, 23, has been at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital since February, where he is recovering from serious head injuries incurred after falling down stairs. He, his mother and step-father, Army Sgt. Maj. James Harris and Castor were among guests invited to the opening of a new 2,000-square-foot day room, created out of a former court yard at the hospital.

The day room is the brainchild of Walter and Susan Lamerton, the Trinity realtors who were also the moving force behind the United Services Organization facility at Tampa International Airport.

"It's something we have been working toward for a long time," said Susan Lamerton.

The day room, which has three couches, several chairs, a flat screen television and a "Kids Corner" section where children can play, was designed to give patients and their families a place to relax away from the confines of a hospital room.

Funding to construct the room is a collaboration between the USO and the Clearwater-based Armed Forces Families Foundation, a non-profit designed to build infrastructure projects helping military families. Started by Nick Peters, a major Taco Bell franchisee, the foundation helps military families throughout the

Southeast,

The project also marks the first time a USO project has been set up in a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital.

It is an experiment, says John Hanson, USO senior vice president and Air Force veteran. One that if as successful as projected, will likely spark phone calls from other facilities seeking information about how they can set one up.

“We are already getting calls,” says Stephen Scott, the hospital chief of physical medicine and rehabilitation and polytrauma program.

Standing in front of patients, service members and staff, Castor says that a time when the VA is widely criticized for a wide range of ills, the staff does not get the credit it deserves for “taking care of America’s heros day in and day out.

“I am very grateful to all of you,” she says, choking up.

And while the war in Afghanistan is drawing to a close, the hospital is still a busy place, says director Kathleen Fogarty.

There are nearly 400 patient, including 18 active duty service members, she says, a figure that has held steady since about 2009, when there were about 30 “when the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were raging.”

For the patients and families, the day room offers welcome relief, says Patrice Harris, who, along with her husband, has spent many a day here as her son is rehabilitated.

“This is great,” she says. “It gets him out so he doesn’t have to stare at the four walls.”

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