

ELDERLY S EARTHQUAKE 89 quiet crisis

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SANTA CRUZ — While many begin to reassemble lives jolted by the Oct. 17 earthquake, the county's senior citizen community is immersed in a quiet crisis of fear, loneliness, ill health and homelessness.

An estimated 400 Santa Cruz County seniors were displaced by the great quake. And the long road back to normality entails more than a new chimney, a plaster job or a simple change of scenery.

Three of the county's largest senior housing facilities — the St. George and Palomar hotels and the Casa del Rey — were evacuated in the quake. All three remain closed.

Hundreds of older residents lost apartments, mobile homes and other living quarters in the disaster. And almost as importantly, the seniors lost security, cherished independence and peace of mind.

Social services catering to seniors have been stressed to the breaking point.

"We are swamped," said Don Allegri from the Adult Protective Services branch of the county Human Resources Agency.

"People who were maybe frail but getting by on their own went past that crossover line after the quake," Allegri said.

"Right now there's a real problem with the type of housing available for seniors," said Brenda Moss, executive director of Senior Network Services.

"I had a 94-year-old man come in yesterday," Moss said. "He lived at Casa del Rey. He talked to me and finally he just started crying. He said 'I don't even know why I'm here. It seems like my life is over. I don't know what to do. My belongings ... I have to start my life over.'" Moss said.

"Younger people, it's easier for them to start over," she said.

Some displaced seniors took refuge with family or friends. But

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now, as the immediate shock of the disaster begins to fade, "families are starting to call because they can't deal with the physical and mental demands of their loved ones," Allegri said.

"We're dealing with increased abuse and neglect cases coming at us because of stress and the after-effects of the disaster," he said.

"People are really coming to grips with the fact their situation has dramatically changed. They're going to need help," Allegri said.

"Some have been living in hotels, shelters or living in a car. They felt they could manage on their own. Pride is involved. A lot of elderly are used to managing on their own, and then they find out they just can't handle it," he said.

Residents of the 97-room Palomar Hotel paid \$295-\$340 for a room with maid service and a bath or shower. They received no meals but could keep a small refrigerator and microwave in their rooms. The Palomar sustained serious but repairable damage in the 7.1 quake. Its status remains in doubt, said manager Ron Fredericks.

"We're looking for grant money," Fredericks said. "If we had to do it ourselves, most of the seniors would be priced out."

A spokesperson for the Santa Cruz Seaside Co., owner-operators

of the Casa del Rey, said the facility's future "as a building" is in doubt. Residents there received a room, bathroom and two meals a day. Some Casa del Rey residents were moved temporarily to the Carousel Motel, also owned by the Seaside Co.

"It's unfortunate," Moss said. "There are other places, but La Posada has a long, long waiting list. A lot of the people at the Casa del Rey were paying \$500-\$600 a month. Dominican Oaks is more like \$1,500 a month. These people cannot afford that."

"At the Casa del Rey, you have meals, privacy, company. It's like a family," Moss said. "Now if you put these people in a board-and-care home, they're losing a lot of their independence. People who lived at the Casa del Rey got used to that style of living."

Routine, the cornerstone of existence for many senior citizens, was shattered by the quake, Allegri said.

Mailing addresses have changed, delaying or misdirecting Social Security and pension checks. Mobile meal services have been interrupted. Friendships have been estranged, coping skills eroded. Medical appointments have been missed. Some seniors have sought solace in alcohol or drugs, Allegri said.

Federal aid is available to the majority of displaced seniors, but

"you need to apply," Moss said. "My concern is that we did not have the number of applicants coming into our center that we would like to," said Paulette Brigiotta, a Senior Services employee and reservist for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"We are encouraging these seniors to come in. In order for them to become qualified — if they were displaced because of the earthquake — they need to apply," Brigiotta said. "There are people at the FEMA office to assist them in applying for aid. We encourage them to come in because there are other agencies there that can help them immediately," she said.

"Workers are coming in from surrounding counties to help us go out in the community and develop an inventory of displaced seniors and match them with resources," Allegri said.

All Saint's Episcopal Church in Watsonville — in partnership with county Adult Services — is helping to place seniors in new homes through its emergency housing fund. The church has set a fundraising goal of \$10,000, and donations are tax-deductible.

"This problem isn't going to go away for months, depending on how the various agencies coordinate in terms of putting some permanent plan together," Allegri said. "Definitely, there was a shortage going into this whole crisis."