

Motel voucher program takes plea to county

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Santa Cruz County did better than expected last week when the Red Cross parceled out \$32.5 million in disaster-relief funds to local agencies and groups, but county supervisors still don't think it is enough.

Most of the Red Cross money was allocated for replacing the housing lost or damaged in the earthquake. But there's no money from the Red Cross so far for the temporary shelter programs that have housed upward of 1,500 homeless people since the earthquake.

County officials had asked the

Red Cross to allocate part of the disaster-relief funds to the motel-voucher program and other interim housing programs — but the request was denied.

The request submitted last week by the county but rejected for consideration by the Red Cross asked, among things, for a \$1 million appropriation for the Community Action Board's motel-voucher program.

The program runs out of money April 22, CAB executive director Christine Johnson-Lyons told the supervisors yesterday morning, and there's no assurance that there will be any more funds available from any sources.

'The motel voucher program is currently in limbo.'

— Christine Johnson-Lyons
Community Action Board

"The motel voucher program is currently in limbo," Johnson-Lyons said. "We have helped 1,500 people — mostly families with children — and 53 percent are from Watsonville and 22 percent from the city of Santa Cruz. Funds will be exhausted on April 22 and we have now stopped is-

suing vouchers."

Still, hundreds are relying on the program for nightly shelter, she told the supervisors. The program paid for shelter for 263 people last night, she said.

Two possibilities exist for more funding, Johnson-Lyons said.

First, there is a lawsuit filed by the legal aid societies in several counties, including Santa Cruz, challenging federal regulations that apparently deprived hundreds of people of temporary federal housing assistance. A settlement conference is scheduled in federal court later this week, Johnson-Lyons said.

The Red Cross, she said, thinks money will be forthcoming to local programs from that lawsuit.

The second possibility is the Red Cross itself. The Red Cross promised supervisors Chairman Robley Levy and County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello

last week that it would consider funding some of the local programs from its ongoing disaster-relief budget.

Celia Organista, lead social worker for the motel voucher program, said this morning she was still waiting to meet with Red Cross officials about additional funding or having the Red Cross take over some of the cases of people who didn't qualify previously for federal or Red Cross aid. Right now, Organista said, the voucher program is already beginning to cut off services for some families.

"We can't keep people when we can't pay for it," she said.

REFERENCE

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