



Maria, Chola and Steven Masero, like many others, are getting used to life in the trailer park.

## Uncertain future haunts FEMA emergency trailer residents

By JAMIE MARKS  
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WATSONVILLE — For the 43 families at the emergency trailer park on Crestview Avenue, there's no place like home.

And after the damage to their homes in the Oct. 17 earthquake, the families have found the next best thing — trailers of their own for the next 1½ years.

But those residents are already worried about where they'll go when that time runs out, and whether they'll be able to afford to live in Watsonville.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers are rent-free for up to 18 months, but residents must pay water, sewer and utility bills. For many families, that can amount to more than \$150 a month. Pacific Gas & Electric Co. recently offered to weatherize the trailers for free.

For some, like Gloria Sanchez, the trailers provide more room than they had before. Now

Sanchez has a three-bedroom home with a kitchen and living room. Before the earthquake, she shared a one-bedroom flat with her two children, for \$190 a month.

"It's way better than before. I used to live in a very old house, with a bathroom outside," said Sanchez, a native of Watsonville. "We pay that kind of rent for those old places because most other people don't want to stay in the old houses," she said.

Sanchez, who is supporting her two children with the help of her brothers and sisters, probably won't be able to return to her home. Her 82-year-old landlady lost seven houses in the quake, and hasn't decided whether to rebuild the units yet.

"I don't know what we're going to do (at the end of the 18 months)," she said. "They can't throw us out on the street. I guess I'll go back to Callaghan Park and stay there."

Please see TRAILER — A8

# Trailer/ Residents worried

*Continued from Page A1*

Sanchez was one of about 150 people who set up a temporary tent city at Callaghan Park after the temblor. Despite city pressure to move to other shelters, the group's persistence paid off: Many of the tent-city dwellers wound up in FEMA trailers.

Evangelina Estrada didn't stay at Callaghan Park. Like many renters in Watsonville, she decided to camp in front of her damaged home until other accommodations could be found.

Her cozy FEMA trailer is decorated with donated furniture, a home entertainment center and bookcase salvaged from her house, and other accoutrements of home. But Estrada knows the trailer is only a temporary solution.

"Every house being built in Watsonville is too expensive for us. We can't afford them," Estrada said.

Estrada pointed to the Highlands subdivision going up right next to the trailer park. She said the units will go for \$1,500 a month, a price she finds exorbitant given the low incomes of most of Watsonville's Latino residents.

Before the quake, her family of four shared a two-bedroom apartment for \$550 a month. The living room was converted into another bedroom.

"The house was too old, so the owner decided to demolish it," said Estrada.

Estrada is on disability for an injury she sustained at a frozen-food plant. Her husband works at a junk yard.

Although their monthly income barely covers their utility bills, Estrada said she thought it would be a good idea for the families at the FEMA trailers to put their money into a savings account for



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

FEMA trailer residents plan to keep in contact with the Watsonville City Council.

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**— Glòria Sanchez**

future need.

Estrada and her husband had several thousand dollars saved four years ago, but a 1½-year long strike

at Watsonville Canning Co. wiped that out. They were just getting back on their feet when the earthquake struck, she said.

Recently, the families met with members of a Salinas-based housing group, CHISPA, to plan for the future.

Estrada has become the trailer park's unofficial representative to the City Council to keep council members informed of the families' plight.

"Some people in Watsonville are not happy that we are getting free rent," Estrada said. "But we paid taxes here for 15 years. We never took welfare or food stamps. We've been working hard."

Estrada said she's discussed the future with other residents of the trailer park, and thinks "everyone is worried."

The Gonzales family managed to retrieve most of their belongings

after the earthquake. They like the trailer park, but they, too, are worried about what will happen to them after their 18 months is up.

"All our money goes to pants, shoes and shirts for the kids. What's left we spend on food," said Miguel Gonzales, a disabled field worker. "With four children, we eat a lot."

Gonzales' wife, Rosario, works at Monterey Mushrooms. But her salary alone can't support the family.

City officials and the Housing Authority are working on several housing projects that will provide some badly needed low-income housing. But whether it will be built in time to help the residents at Crestview is anyone's guess.

"I don't want Watsonville to become another L.A., where there are a lot of rich people and a lot of homeless," said Estrada.

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