

Watsonville provides partial funding for shelter program

By JUDY BRILL
STAFF WRITER

The city of Watsonville has gotten the ball rolling in helping the county's largest homeless-shelter program, which lost half its federal funding and could be forced to turn people away this winter.

The City Council voted Tuesday to award the Interfaith Satellite Shelter Program 10 percent of the program's anticipated \$43,000 shortfall for 1993-94. The shelter program offers shelter and hot meals at 30 churches around the county on a rotating basis. When the need arises, such as in bad weather, the program expands into two National Guard armories, one at Watsonville Airport.

The program has been operating in the county for several years, and expanded into Watsonville in the fall of 1989.

The ISSP initiated a countywide fund-raising drive after learning in April that its main funding source had denied its request for \$188,000 because of a decrease in available funds and a rise in the number of applications.

As a result, ISSP operations shut down in May. The application was placed on a waiting list, and since then, the program has learned it will receive \$91,000 in state operating funds for the current and next fiscal years. Other funds from the federal government, the city of Santa Cruz, Watsonville and private donations bring ISSP's total anticipated budget for 1993-94 to \$110,527.

The money will allow ISSP to reestablish its fall/winter program, but not at last year's level.

"It will be a pretty significant impact," said Judy Schwartz, senior analyst with the county Human Resources Agency.

If sufficient funds cannot be secured, an alternative would be to forfeit use of one of the armories in exchange for a state cash grant. But that would result in the program's 1993-94 bed capacity being "significantly reduced," according to Schwartz. She said the number of beds available to homeless people in Watsonville would drop from 42 to 28, and from 112 to 56 around the county.

This month and next, ISSP will continue to seek additional funds. The current plan is to open the fall/winter program Nov. 1 using

church sites only. That would provide 56 beds in north county and 28 in south county. If enough money can be found, the armories will open in December, increasing the number of beds.

Schwartz said the program would have to have money by Dec. 15 for the program to continue. She said there was the possibility, however, to keep the armories open on a per diem basis, as contributions allowed.

There are no hard figures on the total number of homeless in the county. She said the last count taken in 1990 found about 2,000 people living without shelter around the county.

The Council action came in response to a letter on behalf of the Citizens Committee for the Homeless. The letter, which sought a \$5,000 award, was written by the Rev. Kent Webber, pastor at United Presbyterian Church in Watsonville, one of nine participating area churches.

"Our goal is to serve the same number as last year," Webber said, adding that those who come to ISSP shelters are mostly single men, and 90 percent Latino. "Occasionally, we get women and children, and they get priority consideration."

Webber said between November 1992 and April 1993, ISSP provided shelter on more than 25,000 occasions county-wide.

"Very few people get turned away," he said.

ISSP hopes to obtain half the needed funding from all local jurisdictions and half from private contributions.

The city's contribution will come from \$3,160 withheld from the Fats Waller music festival during this year's social-service allocations, the rest from money frozen by the council for social-service grants. The city already awarded the shelter program \$2,000 during the social-service allotments this spring.

According to Carlos Palacios, Watsonville's assistant finance officer, this is the only social-service request the city has received since this year's budget negotiations. "There certainly was consideration of the impact" ISSP's budget problems would have on the community in the city's decision to award the shelter funds, he said, adding that Watsonville's 42 beds are filled up every year.