

# Tent City folds its flaps

EARTHQUAKE '89 - Watsonville

By JAMIE MARKS

Sentinel staff writer

12-14-89  
WATSONVILLE — Callaghan Park Tent City is gone.

The blue tents and tarps that dotted the small park at Freedom Boulevard and Sudden Street disappeared completely Wednesday, after two months of being home to the homeless.

The last of the families and women living at the park found respite Sunday night at local motels through the Motel Voucher Program, run by the Community Action Board and Shelter Project.

One lone tent stood in the park for three more days, then vanished midday Wednesday.

Since it began a week after the earthquake, the voucher program has housed more than 950 people in local motels and hotels for short periods of time, according to CAB Executive Director Christine Johnson-Lyons.

"The motel vouchers are great for 30 days and we have had some renewals. But we're really going to need to find those long-term options for housing soon," Johnson-Lyons said.

While most of the Callaghan Park families moved into the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers at Crestview Avenue last Saturday, two families and two single women watched helplessly because they didn't qualify.

But help came in the form of the motel voucher program, said Elena Gomez of CAB.

Candalaria Portillo, her husband and two sons moved into the Rio Sands Motel in Rio del Mar for a month.

Josefina Rojas, her husband and baby were placed in the Mid-Town Motel in Watsonville.

And two homeless women also moved into the Mid-Town Motel, Gomez said.

Each of the families and women had a different problem that made their move from Callaghan Park into semi-permanent housing a difficult transition, according to Gomez.

The Rojas family moved back into their room in a boarding house on Union Street, which was damaged by the earthquake, on Sunday.

But they decided to take the offer of help from the motel voucher program when they discovered their building was still jacked up on stilts and hadn't yet gotten a new foundation.

"Sunday night I visited them and talked with them. They didn't feel quite safe in the room because there wasn't a foundation. So I said they could have a free room in a motel, with a kitchen, closet, king-size bed and shower. And the Red Cross paid their rent to reserve their room on Union Street. I told them to think about it."

The next day, the Rojas family decided to take the offer of help.

For the Portillo family, the dilemma about moving centered on transportation to a job and to school.

The husband works as a rest-home janitor in Aptos and Watsonville, but the children attend school in Watsonville.

"What we needed to do was to be able to get him to work and get the kids to school," Gomez said.

The Portillos were offered a room

at the Mid-Town Motel, which is across the street from Callaghan Park, however Candalaria Portillo didn't like the accommodations.

So, Gomez found room at the Rio Sands for the family of four.

"She went there Sunday night and liked it. Monday morning I returned and picked up her sons for school. I offered to transport them again, but she hasn't called again for help," Gomez said.

The two single women decided to take advantage of the free month of motel stay after the tent city began to dissolve.

Resolving the Callaghan Park tent city has been a monumental task for social service agencies, the city, FEMA and other disaster-assistance organizations.

City officials never sanctioned the park because they felt it wasn't a safe or healthy place for families and children.

The motel voucher program has received \$150,000 in advance from the state Housing and Community Development Corp. and is hoping for another \$600,000 to come from the special disaster assistance funding from the state, according to Johnson-Lyons.

She said Santa Cruz County was the only county to receive an advance payment.

"Next week we'll be moving out of the Disaster Assistance Center, but the program will continue," said Gomez. "Unfortunately, it's just a short-term solution. We're not long-term housing.

"With Christmas just around the corner, how do you tell these people their assistance is about to run out?" she wondered.