

✓Latinas say quake relief still absent

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

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WATSONVILLE — Many people are still not qualifying for federal relief aid, three Latino women told a special housing meeting called by State Sen. Henry Mello.

The women, who have been living at a tent city at Callaghan Park since the earthquake, recounted in Spanish how they have been left out of the assistance offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Their testimony revealed the complexity of the problems facing officials as they seek to meet the needs of the low-income and unemployed people displaced by the temblor, many of whom speak only Spanish and who apparently don't understand the bureaucratic hoops they are required to jump through.

One of the women, Maria Hernandez, said she was offered housing at Buena Vista labor camp but didn't take it because she couldn't afford the rent and she wants to live in one of the trailers being installed behind the county courthouse on Freedom Boulevard.

"Buena Vista is totally free," replied Alex Cunningham, the special assistant to the governor.

Hernandez' home has been repaired, but it is being rented to her landlord's daughter, she said. Hernandez cried as she said she was told by FEMA officials she would have to take the Buena Vista housing that was offered, or end up living in the street.

Another woman, Virginia Romero, said her extended family of six hasn't qualified for FEMA emergency housing.

And a woman who identified herself as Marina said she wasn't given emergency housing because she was staying with a friend in an overcrowded apartment and cannot prove she was renting.

Mello commented that some of the people in the shelters were living in Watsonville before the earthquake, but others "have moved here afterward, and they're out as far as I can see."

Cunningham said he's been told by FEMA officials that not all of the people at Callaghan have applied for help. The cannot receive any kind of disaster aid unless they fill out the forms, he said.

Cunningham listened to each of the women speak and asked questions about their cases. In the end, he vowed to review their files personally.