

Quake victims try FEMA again

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — About 30 people showed up at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's housing assistance center here Monday morning to ask FEMA to review their applications for earthquake assistance.

The applicants were among a group of about 150 people who met with public officials Saturday to protest their treatment by FEMA. They have been denied assistance for a variety of reasons, mainly because they don't fit FEMA's criteria for aid. The center usually doesn't see that many people in one day.

The group returned to the FEMA housing office at 734 East Lake Ave. early Monday morning after U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, urged them to try once again for assistance. He told the FEMA official at the meeting "we'd better damn well come up with some assistance here."

"There were many familiar faces," said Paula Ziegelasch, FEMA's local director for housing assistance.

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'There were many familiar faces ... A couple of applications we'll review.'

— Paula Ziegelasch, FEMA official

review," she said. But many applications have already been reviewed once or twice, and the people still don't meet the criteria for help, she said.

Asked if the people will qualify for assistance, short of a change in regulations, Ziegelasch said, "No."

Ziegelasch said most of the denials have been because the people were not displaced because of the earthquake.

"Habitability is the key," she said.

FEMA's evaluation process begins when the federal agency sends an inspector to an applicant's home. If the inspector deems a home safe, sanitary and secure, then the people are not eligible for FEMA assistance, she said.

If the home is not safe, sanitary

or secure, the people would qualify under most circumstances. The applicants have to prove they lived at the residence prior to the earthquake.

If the people left for some reason other than earthquake damage — such as their landlord has deemed the home overcrowded — then they don't qualify for aid, she said.

Since the earthquake, many landlords have begun reducing the number of people in their rental units, Ziegelasch said.

That has resulted in several dozen families being left without FEMA aid. Most of those families are being helped by the Community Action Board's motel voucher program, which temporarily houses families that don't qualify for

FEMA aid.

When a landlord denies that he rented a unit to a family, Ziegelasch said other ways can be found to qualify the family for aid.

At Saturday's meeting a couple told how their trailer had been destroyed in the earthquake but they were refused aid because their landlord denied he ever rented to them.

"We've run into so many cases of this we don't go solely on a landlord's statement," Ziegelasch said.

If an applicant paid cash for a rental but has some other proof — like a letter sent to them at the address — then FEMA will take that as proof of residency, Ziegelasch said.

Many of the people who turned up Monday have been assisted by Western Service Workers Association, a group of volunteers who have been working on earthquake relief out of offices on Airport Boulevard.

Philip Alves, of WSWA, said the group has been "assisting members in finding the reasons why their applications have been denied. We want to know just how FEMA intends to deal with these people."