



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Therese Rappolt Esquivel, 35, says her new Brommer Street apartment 'is like some kind of optical illusion.'

Housing - Oct. 9, 92 Homeless families get a new start

By GREG BEEBE
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■ Woman welcomes homeless — A3

LIVE OAK — The homeless little girl — accustomed to spending nights in a cramped trailer — was cautious at first, slowly sizing up her freshly painted room and comfortable bunk bed.

She poked the mattresses and pressed her hands against the walls, fighting disbelief. In a nearby apartment, a mother admitted that she, too, had opened and closed the doors, and ran her hands along the plasterboard, just to make sure the place she now calls home wasn't the figment of a cruel dream.

For six homeless families, this week marked a new beginning, and the christening of what county officials hope is a fruitful public-private partnership dedicated to reducing

the ranks of the homeless — one family at a time.

The effort combines short-term government assistance, public and private-sector acquisition of housing, and intensive individual counseling to give homeless families a roof, and the means and skills they need to get off the street for good.

A previously run-down apartment building on Brommer Street in Live Oak is the centerpiece of the project. Its six modest, two-bedroom, one-bath units were bought, stripped down and completely refurbished at a cost of \$780,000, paid for by the federal Department

of Housing and Urban Development, and the county's Redevelopment Agency and Housing Authority. The furnished apartments will be homes for single-parent families with children aged 1 to 14.

The families had been living in cars, shelters, cheap motels, seedy one-room flats or with friends. They must pay 30 percent of their income — usually state welfare or unemployment benefits, between \$150 and \$250 a month — and participate in an array of parenting and living-skills classes as well as job training, and in some cases mental-health and substance-abuse counseling.

A half-time case worker — her salary paid by the United Way of Santa Cruz County and HUD — will guide the families through that

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Homes for homeless

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obstacle course called life.

"Ideally, our hope is to get folks to the point where they don't need help," said Judy Schwartz, a senior program analyst at the county's Human Resources Agency who wrote a report on homeless service gaps last year that prompted the project, dubbed "Families in Transition."

The residents were selected from 34 applicants, said Bill Watt of the county's Homeless Employment Project. Because needs vary, some may stay six months; others may remain for more than a year, Watt said.

The families must meet the terms of landlord-tenant and counselor-client agreements with the county or be shown the door, said Watt.

"They are acutely aware that there's a lot of families in line behind them," he said.

"We were looking for people who were willing to work on their barriers to self-sufficiency," said Watt. "We didn't pick the 'best' families — we picked the families who were most willing to own up to what they needed to work on."

About half of the families have backgrounds clouded by drug and

alcohol abuse; the others are leaving some sort of abusive domestic situation.

"A lot of them have been through a lot of trauma," said Watt. "These are people who have been living on the edge for some time."

The families need help with such day-to-day skills as parenting, budgeting and money management, he said.

"If you have no money after you pay your bills, it's hard to talk about budgeting," said Watt.

Therese Rappolt Esquivel, 35, traveled a long, rocky road to get to Brommer Street. A single mother and recovering drug addict, she said "finding a place like this is like some kind of optical illusion."

Esquivel can recall when "we didn't even have a car to sleep in ... I already sold everything that I could possibly sell. We basically had just the clothes on our back."

Having her own apartment was such a shock that "I didn't even know how to go to bed last night." Her 4-year-old daughter Gabriella, though, adjusted to her new home quickly and asked her her mom to "C'mon, tuck me in" Wednesday evening.

Esquivel, who has secretarial ex-