

# Hunting for a home

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EARTHQUAKE 1989 —  
WATSONVILLE -- Rebuilding



José Luis Villegas — Mercury News

Angie Farias, 19, is the center of her family's attention as she searches through the classified ads for a place to live

## Watsonville's housing shortage worsens

By Bob Johnson  
Special to the Mercury News

Nine months after the Loma Prieta earthquake damaged or destroyed 8 percent of Watsonville's homes, the return of hundreds of migrant farmworkers has left the city in the throes of a severe housing crisis, officials say.

The shortage has forced some of the estimated 3,000 harvest workers and their families into substandard, illegal housing and caused others to live seven or more to a bedroom as they hope their landlords won't find out.

"We just had a fire where there were 14 people living in a two-bedroom apartment," said Mike Baldwin, city building inspector. Baldwin's department issues an average of 10 residential abatement orders a month for illegally converted garages and sheds, or for severely overcrowded homes.

Thirteen residents escaped from the July 15 fire in an Elm Street home downtown after they were awakened by a baby coughing in the back bedroom. Later that day, four apartments that housed 37 people were destroyed in a separate blaze.

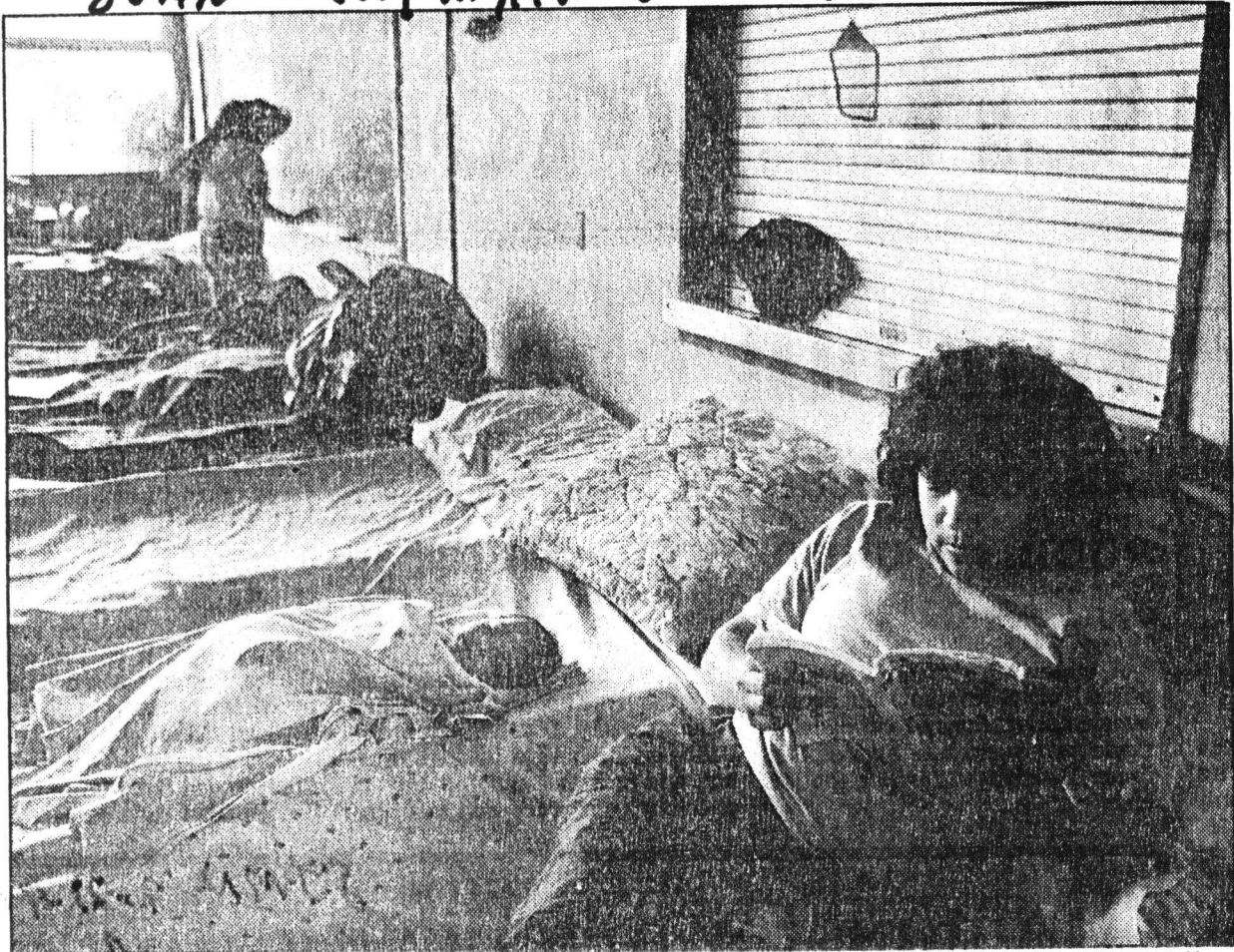
Refugees from both fires are staying at an emergency Red Cross shelter in the cafeteria of E.A. Hall Middle School.

"Typically, there's a lot of illegal units in Watsonville this time of year, but this year it's worse," Baldwin said. "Right now, it's harvest time. We lost legitimate rentals in the earthquake, and the crews are here for the harvest."

Still other workers have been commuting to the

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José Luis Villegas — Mercury News

Maria Angelina Virgin reads as her son naps in a Red Cross shelter

## Farmworkers returning to housing crisis

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fields and greenhouses of the Pajaro Valley from whatever housing they can find in other towns.

When the field hands returned to harvest the crop for Watsonville strawberry grower Tom AmRhein, for instance, some of them were forced to make a daily commute over mountainous Hecker Pass Road because the closest housing they could find was in Gilroy.

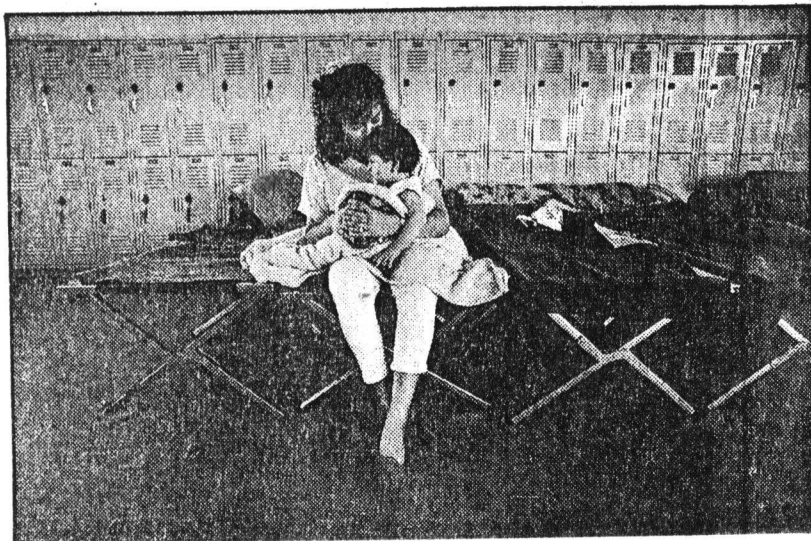
"There were about 10 of them living in Gilroy," said AmRhein, whose peak crew numbers 35 workers. "I imagine there are still about five or six living over there."

Many Watsonville area growers and food processors worried after the earthquake that the housing disaster might leave them short of workers this season, but those worries have proved unfounded.

"I haven't heard anyone complain about not being able to find enough workers," said Jess Brown, general manager of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. "I think I would have had there been a problem."

The housing shortage also has left disaster relief agencies unable to find permanent homes for more than 150 Watsonville families who continue to live in emergency housing since the earthquake.

"We have four staff people in Watsonville searching for affordable housing," said David Vargo,



Yesenia Castrejon, 16, and her daughter have been staying with about 50 other people at a shelter.

volunteer agency coordinator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). "We have not been able to find acceptable housing at the right price in the right location."

FEMA continues to house 129 families in trailers in the Watsonville area. Vargo said the trailers remain filled and an additional four families are on a waiting list.

The local voucher program that provides motel rooms for families turned down by FEMA was deluged with requests for help as the harvest approached in April. It continues to help house 25 Watsonville families.

Many of those people were victims of the housing aftershock that came when landlords grew skittish after the earthquake and shut down illegal housing.

"We had three families who were living in a bus on a ranch until the farmer asked them to leave after the earthquake," said Sharon Katz, a social worker with the voucher program. "Twenty-two people were living on that bus."

The voucher program has had difficulty placing people in permanent homes because landlords have grown reluctant to rent to large families or to part-time field workers without credit, said Anita Ibarra, an eligibility worker.

"A lot of people are sharing housing, and they don't want the landlords to find out," Ibarra said. "There are a lot of people living in shacks around Watsonville. Many of them were living in garages until the landlord asked them to leave after the earthquake."