

Rent help arrives

Future still murky
for quake victims

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WATSONVILLE — Desperately needed rent assistance was released Friday by federal officials, but long-term affordable housing remains a critical post-quake issue for local government.

Santa Cruz County will receive 180 of 500 vouchers issued by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development after the Oct. 17 earthquake.

The vouchers will subsidize rents for low-income people for up to five years, County

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Housing Authority Director Mary James said at a meeting of disaster relief officials Saturday. The vouchers "will go a long way" in helping out, she said, but there are 700 families in need of assistance here.

The "Section 8" vouchers, which subsidize rents that are more than 30 percent of a family's income, will help people now living in motels, trailers supplied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other temporary housing move into permanent residences.

All FEMA temporary housing benefits end in April, 1991, 18 months after the earthquake.

"At the end of 18 months, what happens to these people?" asked Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, who convened the meeting. "We better start focusing on that issue."

Panetta told an assortment of federal, state and local officials at City Hall that for many residents temporary housing is "probably better housing they've ever been in, at least locally. It's going to be very difficult to move those people out and into something poorer."

Seniors displaced from single-room occupancy hotels are "very concerned where they will go," said Don Allegri of Adult Protective Services.

HUD regional administrator Bob De Monte said the vouchers can be used to "rent whatever they can find."

The problem is finding a place. Hundreds of individuals and families in Santa Cruz County need permanent affordable housing, in a market that was extremely tight even before the quake destroyed 4 percent of the housing stock. To compound matters, a large majority of the

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housing severely damaged or destroyed was used by low-income people.

Watsonville is especially hard

pressed because 8 percent of the housing was lost in a market where two or more families often shared homes.

The critical problems ahead are the high cost of land and the length of time necessary to build af-

fordable housing, said James, who is chairwoman of a long-term housing task force.

"There are so many problems to be overcome," she said. Six years from conception to occupancy is a

good record for an affordable housing project, she said.

De Monte said the vouchers are "portable," meaning they can be issued by Santa Cruz County and used elsewhere.