

Long road to recovery

Reviews are mixed on help

By GUY LASNIER
and MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writers

SANTA CRUZ — The federal response to the Oct. 17 earthquake is inevitably compared with 1982 when floods and mudslides battered the county.

Then, disaster relief programs were called disasters themselves. People camped in church halls for months, small businesses foundered and local governments were strained to the financial limit while the relief bureaucracy bogged down in paperwork. Local residents felt trapped and deceived. Local officials were outraged.

This time the verdict is mixed — better than eight years ago but not as good as it could, or should, be.

"They get mixed reviews," said Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, a veteran of attempts to speed government response after disaster. "There are still major problems; the bureaucracy is so slow," he said.

Supervisor Gary Patton said the Federal Emergency Management Agency "made great strides" over 1982, "particularly their willingness to try. 'At least they were trying to be responsive,'" Patton said.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Craig Felber and his helper Elliott Davis have nowhere to go once aid runs out.

Life remains uncertain

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Forced from his mobile home by the earthquake, Craig Felber has spent the past few months living in motel rooms, and wondering where he'll go when his motel vouchers run out.

Disabled since 1976 by a cerebral aneurism — a blood clot in his brain — Felber, 40, lives on a fixed income from Social Security. He is partially paralyzed, has spasms on his left side and is attended full-time by his "buddy," Elliott Davis.

"Gosh yes, it's hard finding places to rent," Felber said. "Social Security isn't that much. It keeps you alive and not much more."

Felber is facing a situation known to many of the quake homeless — when the aid runs out he has nowhere to go.

Felber was given shelter in local motels immediately after the quake. Now, five months later, most of the displaced have found permanent or temporary housing elsewhere. The remaining motel refugees, like Felber, are the ones with particularly tough problems.

Felber and Davis share a small room at the Blackburn House Motel. The rent is paid by the Community Action Board motel voucher program, which issues one- to two-week vouchers with no promise of renewal. Every renewal application

brings a lot of worry, and Felber finds it hard to think too far into the future.

"I just hope they give me more time," he said. Felber can afford to pay \$300 a month for rent, but there is nothing in that price range available.

"Before (the earthquake) it was really hard to find a place," he said. "Now it's probably even worse. People want first and last month's rent, which I can't afford unless the landlord will negotiate."

A county resident since 1982, Felber paid \$300 a month to rent his former home in rural Watsonville. The earthquake ripped up the structure, destroying the plumbing and wiring. Felber lived without water or heat for eight days after the quake because he didn't know government help was available.

"I didn't know there was a FEMA," he said. "I heard about them by word of mouth."

At the disaster center, Felber received food vouchers and was referred to the motel voucher program in Aptos. He asked to be moved from his first motel because he felt the management there was biased against Davis, who is black.

Felber is happy with the help he's been given, and says the relief workers have been helpful and caring. But the rental vouchers are uncertain and he has no idea where he'll go when they stop.

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

REFERENCE

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