

No room to move

Watsonville tries to solve a nightmare of housing

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

WELCOME TO WATSONVILLE. But don't plan on finding an affordable home — there's no room.

Concepcion Rodriguez and her family didn't know that when they arrived in Watsonville, but they know it now.

Like so many others, the Rodriguez family emigrated from Mexico to Watsonville to work in the nearby fields. But after being here two years, they're still trying to find a home.

At first, the family of five crowded into a cousin's home in Watsonville. The Rodriguezes later found a three-bedroom house for \$600 a month. That wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't been sharing it with nine strangers.

A few months later, seeking privacy, they moved into a converted shed for which they are paying \$400 a month.

"Here at least there are jobs, but you suffer for them," said Rodriguez, 24, who lives in the shed with her husband, her son, and her brother and sister.

Humberto Jacobo used to share a home with other families in Watsonville with his wife and 2-year-old son. But sporadic work in the fields didn't pay the \$450-a-month rent.

Today, he and his young son can be found camping on the banks of the Pajaro River in a shoddy shack braced with branches found nearby, scraps of wood, and pieces of carpet and plastic. The shelter is merely that, and provides no relief from the cold or rain. His wife has lived in Salinas with friends since giving birth to their second child in December.

Jacobo hopes that in the spring he'll get enough work harvesting crops to reunite his family and move from the riverbank.

Over the past decade, the largest population increase in the city's history has pushed the housing shortage to an all-time high.

In this community of 32,000, it has become increasingly difficult for families to find a decent, affordable place to live. The growing need, in turn, has contributed to a very real slum housing market.

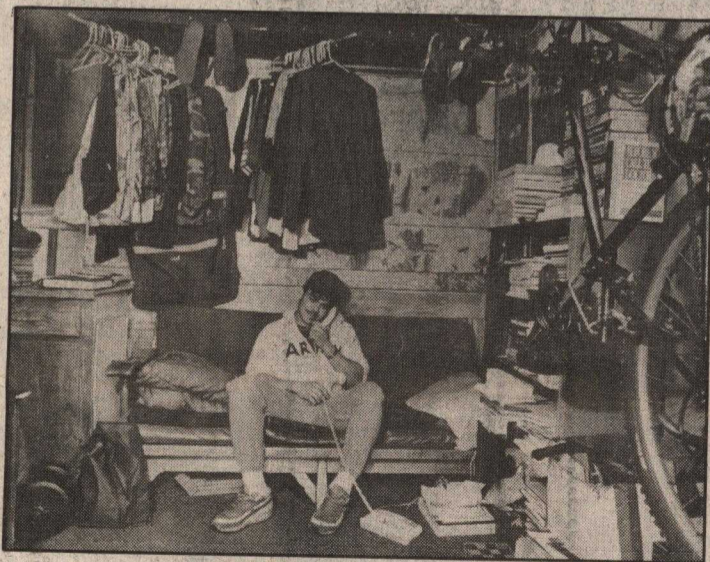
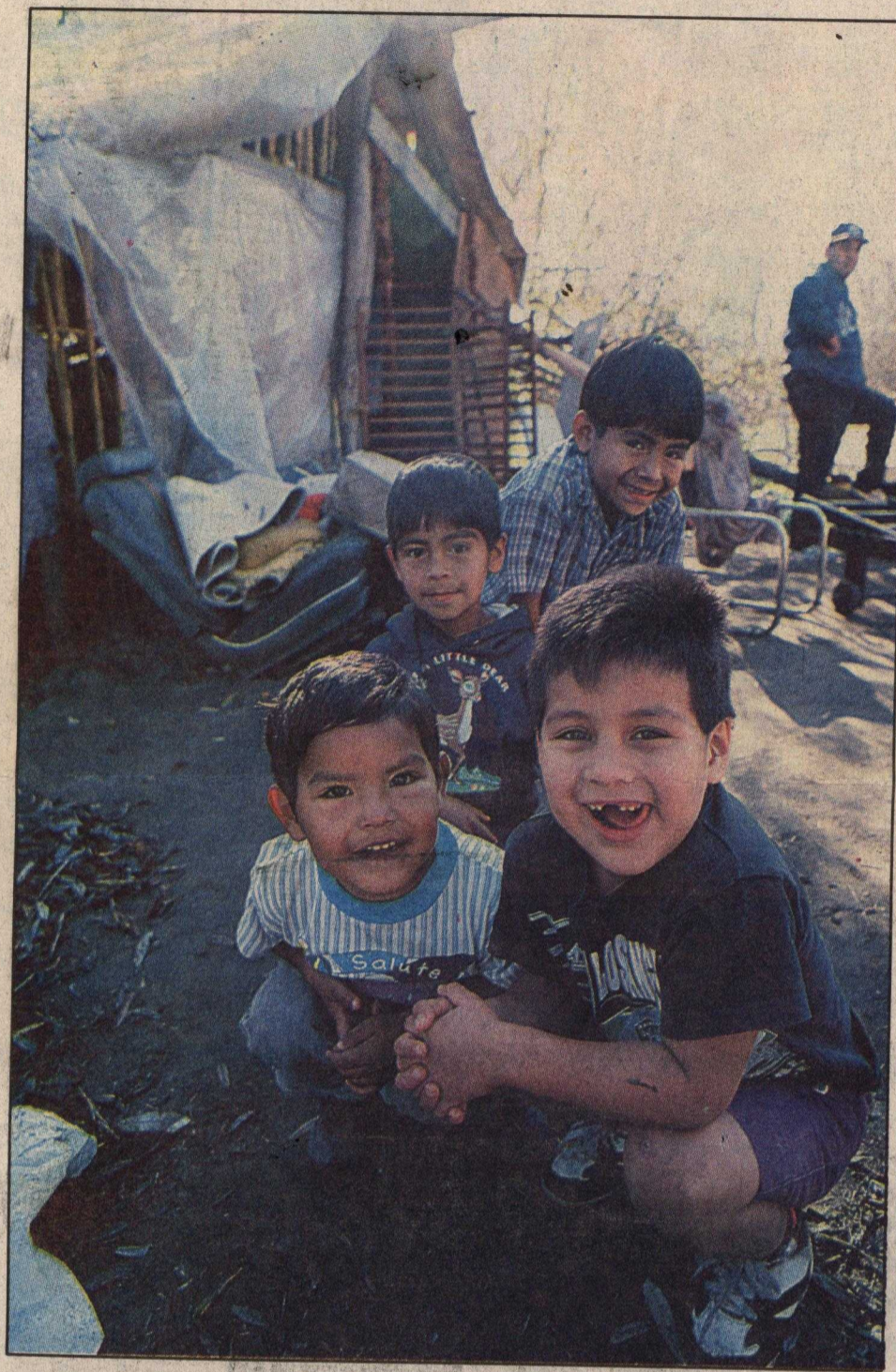
But building housing for poor people is not done easily. The few open parcels in the city are expensive, and it's difficult to secure government and private financing for subsidized housing projects.

Responding to repeated pleas for help by farm worker advocates, city leaders are focusing on other ways to increase the supply of low-priced rentals.

In an effort to shore up dilapidated homes and tear down those that are dangerous, the City Council is considering a law that gives landlords one year to get their rental units inspected by the city and certified as meeting standards.

Building inspectors already have been given broader powers to enforce the city's housing code and cite landlords who don't comply with orders to clean up their rentals. As a result, more tenants living in buildings landlords don't want to fix up, or that are so bad that they can't be fixed, likely will be asked to leave.

Another law the council is considering would require landlords to compensate those families forced into the street when



In the top photo, Humberto Jacobo Jr., front left, was forced to move from town to a shanty on the banks of the Pajaro River. At left, Robert Mejilla relaxes at home.

Bill Lovejoy/
Sentinel photos

the city deems their home hazardous.

Many say that new laws or no, it will be difficult to improve the housing situation in Watsonville.

"They can't control the quantity of people coming into this city, so how are they going to control the housing?" said Tom AmRhein, a strawberry farmer and Watsonville native.

Watsonville's population surged 33 percent in the 1980s, according to the 1990 census. Many new arrivals came from Mexico to work in the fields, which yielded crops worth \$244 million in 1992 and made agriculture Santa Cruz County's

leading industry.

It's a change that can't be ignored, and has many residents wanting to put the brakes on population growth.

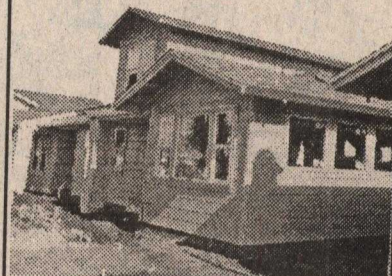
"There's a sentiment in the community that this isn't the town we grew up in," said Councilman Todd McFarren.

Impact of agriculture

Still, farm labor is required to keep agriculture going.

"We want to keep agriculture a viable industry in this community, but we need workers and workers need housing," said Mayor Lowell Hurst, who is a high

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■ Watsonville works to fix dilapidated homes while helping agencies build anew.

■ A woman who lived in crowded housing gets a new housing authority apartment.

■ Landlords get a hand with low-interest loans.

school agriculture teacher.

Hurst and farmers say the rules of the Bracero program no longer apply, where a set number of Mexican laborers were allowed to work here between the 1940s and 1960s for a specific amount of time.

"You've gone from a migrant, controlled workforce into uncontrolled immigration," said AmRhein.

Most farmers have given up providing on-site housing for workers because of the liabilities now written into housing regulations, AmRhein said.

Nearly one-third of Watsonville's residents, most of them Latino, live in crowded conditions, according to city figures. Often a house meant for one family holds three or four. At least 12 percent of the houses and apartments in the city — roughly 1,000 dwellings — are considered substandard, an estimate most housing advocates said is conservative.

"It's not uncommon for us to find 20 people in a garage," said Watsonville Fire Chief Tom Wiley, who is also one of two part-time city building inspectors.

Wiley and others call this "a disaster waiting to happen." Landlords who rent slum housing take shortcuts resulting in shoddy construction: exposed wiring, leaky plumbing and flimsy, unsafe walls and roofs.

Sheds, garages and even chicken coops are rented as places to live.

"A whole lot of the problems we're looking at are structures people were never meant to live in," said Wiley.

To relieve crowding and replace substandard housing, Watsonville would need to build at least 2,200 houses and apartments, according to city figures.

The housing crunch is only expected to worsen in a city that faces certain growth, a rising cost of living and a limited job market.

Not all who live in crowded, unsafe conditions are recent immigrants from Mexico, or families who are being exploited by a dishonest landlord.

Longtime Watsonville families like the Mejillas, who converted their garage into

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Bill Lovejoy

Because of the shortage of housing, outbuildings have been converted to living space. One family found a home at this shed on Bockius Street in Watsonville.



For poor people, decent housing in short supply

Much of Watsonville's housing is overcrowded or substandard. Among the contributing factors are these:

- In the past decade, Watsonville's population has grown three times faster than the construction of houses and apartments; the majority of those were market-rate.

- The 1989 earthquake destroyed 8 percent of the city's housing, most of the damage occurring in low-rent neighborhoods.

- Santa Cruz County is one of the five most expensive housing markets in the nation.

- Though Watsonville comprises only 14 percent of the county's population, it is home to a disproportionate number of the county's poor. The average median income in Watsonville for a family of four is \$31,160, compared to the county average of \$47,500.

- About 55 percent of city residents earn incomes that are low or very low and they can't afford market-rate rents, typically \$820 for a two-bedroom apartment.

- Many jobs in agriculture, one of the main industries, pay low wages, and the closure of food processing plants combined with the recession have pushed unemployment to 20 percent.

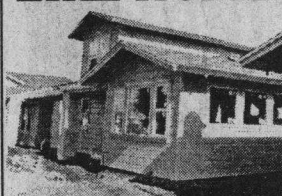
- Rents are high because cheaper units are never empty.

Watsonville confronts a housing nightmare

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a bedroom for nine sons. Robert Mejilla, 22, now lives in a windowless room that is part of the garage he shared with his brothers, who are in their late teens and early 20s.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME



Watsonville struggles to provide housing for its poor

"The problem with crowded housing is violence," said Mejilla. "Too many people in a certain area don't get along — it doesn't matter if they're families."

He can't afford to rent in nearby apartments, which average \$600 a month for a single bedroom.

"People who grow up here can't afford to live here," said Mejilla, who works part time while attending college.



Recognizing the problem

Many agree that the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake not only shook a few hundred homes off their foundations, but rattled attitudes toward housing. City leaders today don't have an explanation for actions by their predecessors.



'People had a real crisis in affordable housing for years, but former councils unfortunately didn't make that a priority.'

— Councilman Todd McFarren

forced to cram 20 people into a three-bedroom house because building inspectors wouldn't allow them to use their garage as their children's bedroom.

"If it's to make a profit, it's not all right, but if it's for your family, what's the big deal?" said Rudy Mar-

problem in a clear light," said Mayor Hurst. "(Housing problems) were brought into the open more than they were before."

Says Councilman McFarren: "People had a real crisis in affordable housing for years, but former councils unfortunately didn't make that a priority."

Though Watsonville leaders see land annexation as one of the best ways to alleviate crowding, rehabilitating low-cost — usually older — housing will be a priority in the next five years, according to a report recently released by the city.

One of the first steps in improving housing conditions is enforcement of housing codes. Until two years ago, the city did not enforce its housing laws, which gave landlords free rein to turn profits without fear of punishment for exploiting those desperate for a roof over their heads.

"There were (housing) ordinances we'd had for ages, but nothing would be done with it," said Assistant City Attorney Cheryl Walsh, because these cases weren't being handled by the city attorney's office.

"For whatever reason, it wasn't done," Walsh said. "But we knew we had a lot of violations and had to correct things."

In the past two years, the city stance has changed. Walsh was hired part time to lead building code enforcement.

First, she put together a building code policy, which she said had been "haphazard" at best, and formed a committee to track violations.

"The city wouldn't have been able to do anything if they hadn't hired (Walsh)," said City Manager Steve Salomon.

Now the city is putting teeth in its codes, said Walsh.

If landlords don't repair violations found by inspectors within a certain period — usually they're given a couple of months — the city said it will fine them. Just one electrical or plumbing problem can cost \$500, Walsh said, and one house could have as many as 15 violations. If the fines are ignored, Walsh said, landlords could face misdemeanor charges and jail time, which would be a first for the city.

"These are criminal violations, and that's how we're going to handle them," said Walsh.

Building officials hope the city's new stance on housing enforcement will give landlords a reason to make their rental units safe, or remove them from the market.

Enforcement difficulties

In the past two years, two part-time building officials have inspected nearly 500 homes and apartments.

Even with that, Wiley said one inspector would need to work full time for two years to catch up with the inspections that are needed. The numbers of crowded homes, and converted garages, basements and sheds far exceed the city's ability to keep track of them, said Wiley.

And because of the city's record of non-enforcement, it may take time before delinquent landlords fear punishment in court. Two landlords have been cited since December.

"They're finding out we're not going to go away, and are surprised when we come back" to check up on a prior violation, said Wiley.

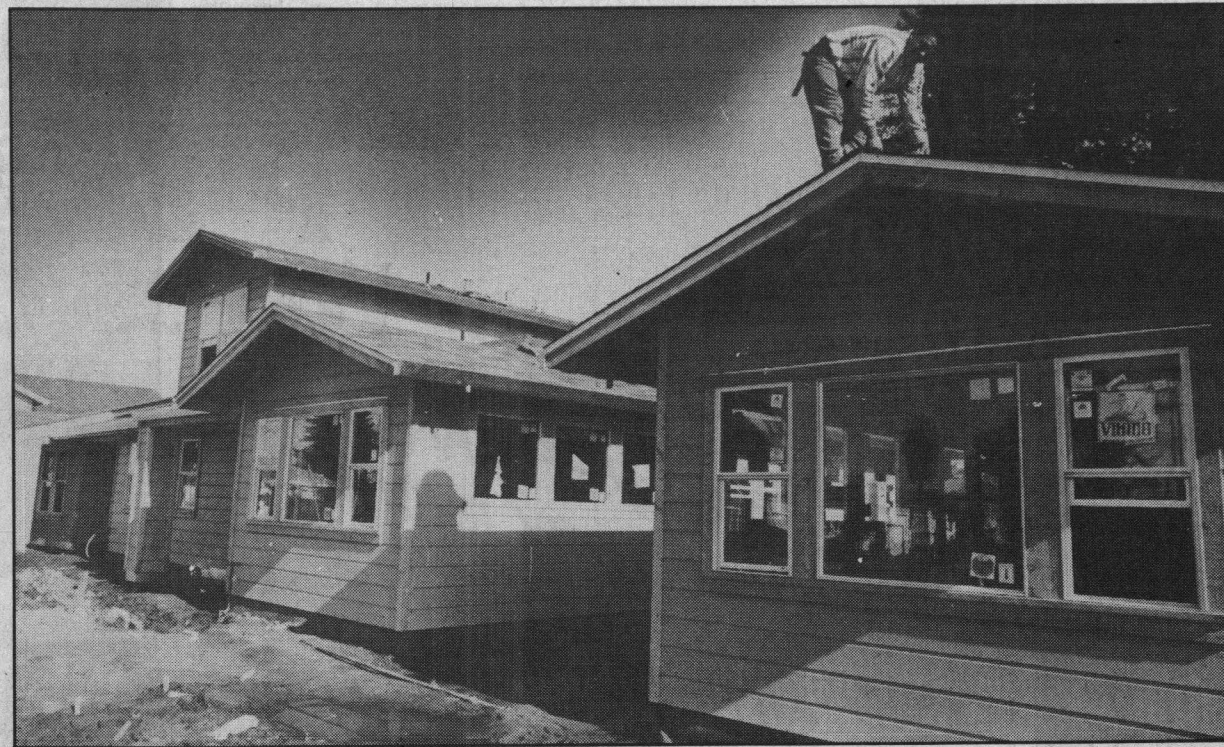
Inspectors are instructed to work with landlords whose rentals can be repaired, and to evict tenants from unsafe structures.

But enforcement can be a game of cat and mouse. Sometimes, landlords ordered to evict tenants simply bring in new people as soon as the inspectors are gone.

The Rodriguezes weren't the first to pay rent for the shed they call home. Several months ago, Wiley found five men living in the same place and ordered the landlord to evict them because of hazards such as exposed wires running across the ceiling to provide electricity for a makeshift kitchen. A bathroom was added with a toilet and portable shower.

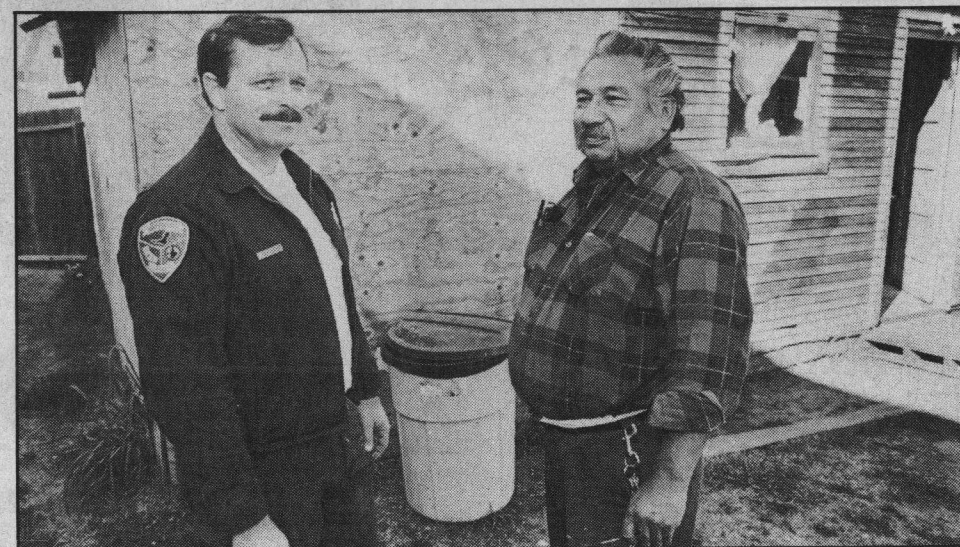
The landlord will be cited and required to tear the shed down. That means the Rodriguezes will be looking for another home.

Crowded housing conditions leave little space for children to play. This boy, who lives on Maple Street in Watsonville, uses a back alley as a playground.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Subsidized housing projects take time and money. Tierra Linda, under construction in Watsonville, cost \$2.8 million and will provide 18 families with new homes.



Fire Chief Tom Wiley, left, and Domingo Lopez are Watsonville's housing safety inspection team.

In the streets

"It's a real tough one — you are talking about putting people out in the street," Wiley said.

Often, families who are evicted have nowhere to go. Three emergency shelters in Watsonville hold 120 people, but most are full during the year and are forced to turn people away.

An ordinance being considered by the City Council would punish landlords who rent hazardous housing by making them pay three months' rent to tenants who are evicted by the city.

Landlords profiting from rents on substandard or illegal housing "should contribute to the hardships they're causing the family," said Legal Aid attorney Gary McNeil.

A similar ordinance passed by the county in 1992 has had "minimal" results, according to a county report.

But the city of Santa Cruz, which also has such an ordinance, forced a landlord to pay \$8,000 to a family of four after they were evicted without notice from

their Beach Flats home because it violated housing codes.

McNeil, who represented the Beach Flats family, cautioned that such ordinances should be used sparingly.

"Our emphasis in the ordinance is that it be enforced for life-threatening conditions," McNeil said. "The bottom line is that people be housed."

McNeil and other housing advocates said cities shouldn't use laws to clamp down on housing that's substandard but not dangerous.

"(Local governments) should be doing code enforcement in a way that saves housing for people, because there's not enough out there," said McNeil.

Inspectors are working with the Mejillas family, whose sons have slept in their garage for years, to make it meet code requirements.

Not everyone is happy with the city's new enforcement tactics.

The Martinez clan, consisting of three brothers and their families, were one of the first cited under the tougher enforcement stance. They complain they are

time, 33, a father of four. He said the bedrooms he and his brothers built in the garage were safe before building inspectors made them remove interior walls. Inspectors said there weren't enough doors, but the Martinez family said they'd be willing to work out a solution.

"You have your laws, but you have to help find solutions, too," said Martinez.

Kathy Thibodeaux, with the Tri-County Apartments Association, which covers Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, cautioned that cities can do more harm than good if they become "overzealous and picky" in housing enforcement.

She said granny units or converted garages and additions "are often the most affordable housing in the community, and most are well-maintained."

"You can't just go in and decide to abate this housing without having a viable alternative," Thibodeaux said. "It's a more critical issue in Watsonville because of the amount of that type of housing."

Some object to the proposed ordinance that would charge landlords for rental inspection, saying only law-abiding landlords are likely to comply.

"The city knows where the majority of these units are, and I don't know why they don't go after those people — they're making everybody pay for the persons taking advantage of this problem," said Andy Moore, a landlord in Watsonville.

The ordinance, she said, is a "vast intrusion to a majority who aren't responsible" for poor housing conditions.

"The ordinances that are being proposed ... they're not hitting the problem of affordable housing," said Thibodeaux. "It's costing the landlords and that's not good for the city."

For some, it's difficult to justify kicking families out of housing when the supposed dangers haven't been tracked by the city. The city Fire Department has not kept record of how many fires, injuries or deaths have resulted from poor housing, said Wiley.

"We're not sure about the (number of) accidents ... people don't want to report because people don't want to lose these (shelters)," said Walsh.

In July 1990, fire destroyed two Watsonville homes that had poor wiring, roofing and other code violations. Thirteen residents were evacuated from an Elm Street house and four families were displaced from a home on Lincoln Street.

Some families are easy prey for slumlords, say housing officials, because they are illegal immigrants from Mexico. They represent many who are likely to earn low wages, live in poor conditions, and are afraid to complain for fear of being deported.

But Phyllis Katz, a Legal Aid lawyer, said this applies to all people living in poverty, not just those here illegally.

"They're desperate to find housing, and they're not going to find a (rental) unit that'll accept their larger family," said Katz, "and they have insufficient income to support high rents in the area."

Many living in these conditions often say at least it's a roof over their heads.

Rent subsidies would help

County officials suggest the City Council consider rent subsidies, under the federal Section 8 program.

The county Housing Authority helps 2,200 families with rent, with another 8,000 on a waiting list. Half the families are from Watsonville. Families who now qualify applied for assistance in 1987.

"There's more people under needy circumstances than we have the power to help," said Mary James, executive director of the Housing Authority. "One family is living in a bus, another is being evicted, another is in a shelter, another is doubling up."

Despite recent efforts to improve the living conditions in Watsonville, some council members like McFarren say it's hard to say when, and if, they will make a significant dent in the longtime problem.

"The answer to that question is: will there ever be an end to poverty?"

"(Watsonville) is never going to solve this on its own. All we can do is set some policies and try to make a difference."