

# Falling through the cracks

## 'Ineligible' victims find themselves in spotlight

By TOM LONG

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WATSONVILLE — Congressman Leon Panetta met some people he didn't expect to meet at the Saturday dedication of mobile homes for people who've been living in tents since the Oct. 17 quake.

He met two families that are falling through cracks in the system.

And he made them the focus of a meeting of local, state and federal officials later that morning.

"What are we going to do about these families?" Panetta asked representatives of a plethora of agencies squeezed into the Watsonville City Council Chamber. "Where are they going to go?"

"I do not want these people to fall through the cracks," he said.

Panetta met Candelario Portillo and Josefina Rojas as their neighbors from the Callaghan Park tent city moved into 11 of the 43 three-bedroom mobile homes behind the County Courthouse Annex on Freedom Boulevard.

All those neighbors had met the Federal Emergency Management Agency's eligibility requirements for temporary housing, and are eligible to stay in the spacious trailers — which came equipped with brand new stoves, refrigerators, linens, pots, silverware and other household items — for as long as 18 months.

Neither Portillo's family of four or Rojas' family of three qualified under FEMA rules. Nor did two other single women who have been living at the tent city, one of whom is pregnant.

### ■ Families move into FEMA's mobile homes — Page A2

FEMA officials told Panetta that about 50 percent of those who have applied for housing in Santa Cruz County have been found ineligible. But officials said most of those are people who found housing in the meantime or who applied on the chance that they might need housing.

But some people simply don't meet FEMA requirements.

Panetta asked Rojas and Portillo to attend his weekly meeting of government officials and tell their stories. They brought along Maurina Makwakwa, one of the single women still living at Callaghan Park.

Please see VICTIMS — A26



Candelario Portillo, right, Josefina Rojas, far right, recount their plight to state Sen. Henry Mello.

Dan Covro/Sentinel

## A forgotten woman's prayer

By JAMIE MARKS

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WATSONVILLE — Candelario Portillo watched Saturday morning as many of her friends moved into new mobile homes after spending weeks in tents at Callaghan Park.

But all she could do was watch. Portillo and her family of four did not qualify for one of the homes.

She did not know where she was going to sleep Saturday night. Or next week. Or next month.

Sitting under her tent in Callaghan Park Friday afternoon, Portillo pondered her family's fate.

"It's sad," said Portillo in Spanish, as she

thought about her friends moving away. "I don't know where I'll go. I guess the streets."

Portillo, her husband and two teen-age sons were living with her sister-in-law when the earthquake struck. Although the home wasn't damaged, Portillo's family was asked to leave because it was too crowded.

In desperation, they moved into the "unofficial" tent city at Callaghan Park, joining some 150 other people who were displaced by the earthquake.

While federal aid has come to the earthquake victims, Portillo is among "Los olvidados," the forgotten ones, the ones who fall between the cracks when disaster strikes a town with a huge housing crisis.

"Do you know anyone who has a garage?" she asks.

Portillo has been offered a couple months of rent money if she can find a place to live. But she's looked, and there isn't an apartment or house available.

She's also been offered shelter at the County Fairgrounds, even though she's not officially a quake victim. But she doesn't want to go because she doesn't like the shelter. Many families fear the number of single men currently living at the fairground shelter.

Looking at the tents Friday afternoon, Portillo said a brief prayer.

"God help me."

## Victims/ 'Ineligible' for FEMA in spotlight

Continued from Page A1

Through an interpreter, Rojas told those gathered that her family had been renting a room from friends when the quake hit. Even though the house she was in was not damaged, she was forced to move because relatives of her roommates had been left homeless and they needed the room she had been renting.

FEMA officials agreed that she was not eligible for aid because the house where she had lived had not been damaged.

"But the only reason she's here is because of that damn earthquake," Panetta said.

"We have a new category of people here — the earthquake homeless," State Assemblyman Sam Farr said.

Members of various agencies quickly offered suggestions as to what could be done for the families and the single women. None of them want to move to the shelter at the County Fairgrounds, where many single men are staying and rumors of gang activity abound.

"Families will not go out to the fairgrounds until the single men there are corralled," said Watsonville Mayor Betty Murphy.

A meeting between FEMA, the Red Cross, the Community Action Board and a city representative was quickly set up to try and come up with ways to offer at least temporary shelter to the women and their families, and people from other shelters who will not qualify for the FEMA mobile homes.

It was suggested that if FEMA ends up importing more mobile homes than it needs for eligible families, the agency could then

turn the extra homes over to the state, who in turn could set up a program for those homeless who were ineligible the first time around. FEMA officials said they would look into the idea.

The quick response from agencies other than FEMA heartened Luther Perry, chairman of the Housing Recovery Task Force, which is still trying to find both temporary and long-term housing for hundreds of people left homeless by the quake.

"By this time in April, I would say very few people will have slipped through the cracks," Perry said. "But no one or two or three agencies can take care of everybody. People have different circumstances."

But Perry said he is still concerned about the lack of long-term housing in the area and worries whether enough money will trickle down from the federal government to subsidize local low income housing development.

"All we need is about half the cost of one stealth bomber — about \$225 million," Perry said.

"But the fact of the matter is life is tough in other parts of the country, too. People are living in garbage cans in New York City, people are living under cardboard in Washington, D.C.," Perry said.

Friday night, Josefina Rojas and her two children slept in a tent at Callaghan Park, surrounded by tents filled with her friends.

By Saturday night, most of those friends were sleeping in new mobile homes. But not Josefina Rojas and her two children. They were still trying to step over the cracks.