

Shelter residents reluctant to leave Watsonville armory

EARTHQUAKE '89 - Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE — Residents of a Red Cross shelter at the National Guard Armory say they'll refuse to move to another shelter if more permanent housing isn't available by Dec. 1.

Red Cross and National Guard officials say they need to shut the shelter by then, and consolidate shelter residents at the county Fairgrounds shelter, which has more space and facilities for better service.

The armory, on Airport Boulevard near the airport, was supposed to close last week, but residents successfully fought to keep it open. Red Cross officials had cleared out food and supplies, but in the face of the residents' refusal to leave, the supplies were returned.

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"It's more comfortable and clean here than at the shelter at the fairgrounds," shelter resident Daniel Roman said in Spanish, through a teen-age interpreter.

Roman and his wife, Esperanza, have been in the shelter with five children since shortly after the Oct. 17 earthquake.

"Unfortunately, it's not just our decision to make," said Al Panico, director of the Red Cross district services. The orders to clear the armory have come from state officials of the National Guard, which

needs the armory for other programs, including for a state shelter program to house other homeless people during bad weather. And, Panico said, answers about the long-term housing must come from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Panico said he has no idea when the shelter residents will have more permanent housing available, but he expects to know more after a meeting Monday with FEMA officials.

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Maria Rodriguez likes the armory, which residents say is more comfortable than the fairgrounds.

Armory/ Residents are 'family'

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FEMA has had California Department of Transportation workers working 12 hours a day for the past two weeks to prepare an emergency mobile-home park. The park will be on county land behind the Watsonville county courthouse on Freedom Boulevard.

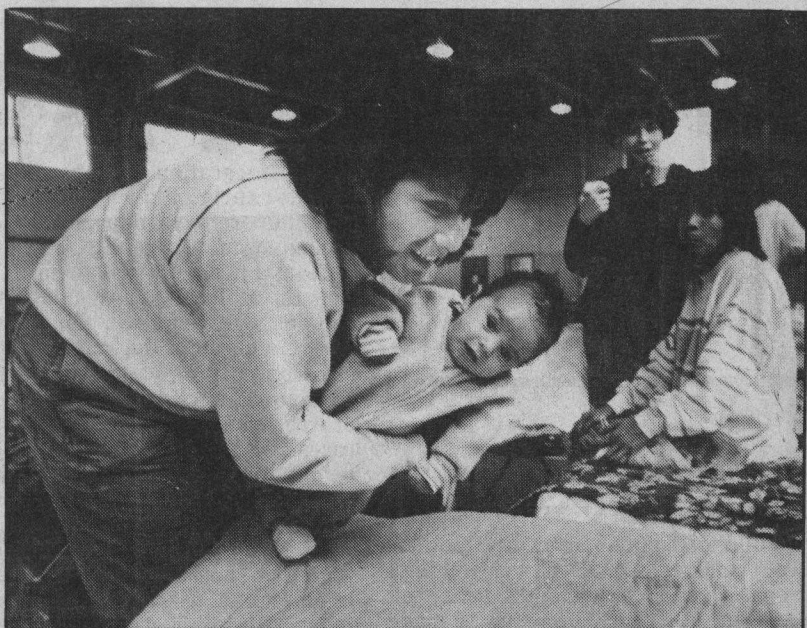
Last week, FEMA officials said the park might open Dec. 4, which would be three days after the armory residents are supposed to move.

Red Cross leaders have tried to persuade the armory residents that they can be better served at the fairgrounds, where hot meals can be cooked, and private "rooms" have been created with partitions.

But the armory residents said they feel more at home together, and would rather endure a small amount of discomfort at the armory than be with a larger crowd of strangers at the fairgrounds.

"A lot of them have teen-age daughters, and they wouldn't want them to be there (at the fairgrounds shelter) because of gang problems," said 13-year-old Maria Saucedo, who translated for Roman and another adult resident, Jorge Gallegos.

Saucedo, who entertained her baby cousin on one of the shelter cots, said the group of 60 to 80 residents at the shelter has grown to be like an extended family, with



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Marita Palacia and son, Ulysses, are members of armory 'family.'

everyone watching each other's children during the hours parents work or search for jobs or housing.

"They said they are going to fight to stay, and if they close this place, they are going to stay outside until FEMA signs a paper saying where they can go (for more permanent housing)," Saucedo said.

At one point, some of the residents said, they were hearing that they would be at the top of some agency's list to move into the

mobile-home park being built by FEMA. But now, Saucedo said, the story keeps changing.

A FEMA spokesman said the agency has not made a list of who will have first crack at the mobile homes.

But the FEMA housing office in Watsonville has case workers interviewing families in an attempt to find out who can be placed in rental housing elsewhere, and who needs the mobile homes most.