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HOMELESS

More than 1,000 without shelter, advocate says

By GREG BEEBE
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APTOS — As winter approaches, more than three-quarters of the homeless people in Santa Cruz County are unable to find shelter at night, according to a report released Tuesday by the Community Action Board, a non-profit social-service organization.

"We know that there are only 266 shelter beds in the county, and with the cold weather and effects of the recession, the shelters are almost always full," said Paul Brindel, director of the board's Shelter Project.

After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, a local housing coalition estimated that nearly 2,000 people were homeless countywide. That number has not declined, and in fact, said Brindel, there is reason to believe it has grown in the last year.

"I think the number is way low," said Brindel. "Clearly, we didn't count everybody. ... Following the national trends, we've seen a 10- to 20-percent increase in homelessness over the past year.

"With the recession and cuts in benefits such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children, I think we are just beginning to see a massive number of people who are on the brink of homelessness," Brindel said.

Of the maximum 266 shelter beds expected to be available to homeless people this winter, 45 are reserved for use by men only, and another 15 are set aside for the mentally ill, reducing the number of beds to 206.

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— Paul Brindel,
Shelter Project.

Although county and city governments have acknowledged in recent resolutions that the local homeless problem has reached crisis proportions, Brindel said funding from federal, state and local sources is still in short supply.

Emergency shelter programs — including the 11-month-old Housing for Medical Emergencies (HOME) program which caters to homeless people stricken by serious illness — continue to struggle for funding, Brindel said. More than 470 people who are too sick to be on the street or in shelters have been served by HOME for such ailments as broken bones, complications from pregnancy, tuberculosis and cancer.

"With the rains and the cold, the problem has become a community health and safety issue of the first order," Brindel said.

Syd Wilby, director of the county's Homeless Health Care program, said the winter weather just adds to the woes of homeless. Last year's unusually low temperatures, she said, contributed to the deaths of two homeless people.