

Affirmative action

It's working in Santa Cruz County

By LANE WALLACE
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Santa Cruz County's increased emphasis on hiring minorities is working: More than a quarter of the workers hired in the last year are minorities.

Of 277 workers hired, 76 — 27 percent — were minorities, Personnel Director Bob Palmer said in a report to county supervisors at yesterday's budget sessions. At the beginning of last year, 17 percent of the more than 2,000 county government workers were minorities.

Palmer attributed the increase to a restructuring of the Personnel Department that allowed staff members Kelly Menehan, Olivia Madrigal and Ernesto Romero to concentrate on recruiting minorities, a program known as affirmative action.

The staff has helped put on seminars about county employment, including ones at Radcliff

Adult School and the Center for Employment Training in Watsonville.

The staff is working with the state Employment Development Department and had a booth at the Santa Cruz County Fair last year. The efforts will continue, Palmer said.

Palmer said Latinos made up three-quarters of the minority workers in last year's count, or 13 percent of the work force. Exact numbers of those hired in the last year were not immediately available.

The county's goal is to bring up the percentage of minority workers to roughly match the percentage of minorities in the community. The 1990 census listed 20 percent of the county's population as Latino; it was 14 percent in the 1980 census.

As the percentage of Latinos in the county grows, so does the need for county employees who

speak Spanish, Palmer said.

Employees who speak fluent Spanish earn an extra 50 cents an hour and those who can write it as well earn an extra 75 cents, providing those skills are needed in their jobs. The county also offers a 16-hour class that gives workers rudimentary Spanish skills, but there is no extra pay for those who complete it.

Santa Cruz-area Supervisor Gary Patton tossed out the idea of providing training that would give workers substantial Spanish skills, but wouldn't necessarily make them fluent. Palmer said the county has been looking at the idea for several years.

Patton said he isn't making any proposal this year.

"It's a good idea to think about these issues," said Patton, who is in his second semester of Spanish classes at Cabrillo College and plans to take an intensive course this summer.