

Army Corps hits town

Reviews, money help the victims

by GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Larry Leahy of the Army Corps of Engineers first witnessed the Oct. 17 earthquake's devastation from his home in Omaha, Neb.

As he watched televised news reports of the disaster, "I had a real good feeling I would be going somewhere soon," Leahy said.

A project manager for the Superfund federal toxic waste management program, Leahy, 29, has joined 54 other civilian and military members of the Army Corps in assessing damage from the 7.1 quake. Their assessments form the foundation for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) rental assistance grants and Small Business Association loans.

After a federal assistance and/or loan request is processed, Leahy and the other Corps engineers have 48 hours to visit the damaged home, talk to the occupants or homeowners, and assess damage and property losses.

In some cases, the engineers have on-the-spot assistance checks to give to quake victims.

The map-covered walls of the Corps' headquarters at the Dream Inn are divided into four Santa Cruz County zones. After a early-morning flurry of appointment-making and map-checking, the engineers climb into rented cars and hit the road.

"Some of these homes are way up in the hills," said Roger Henderson, Corps coordinator for the city and county of Santa Cruz.

"Finding the houses, finding the people, trying to catch up with them — that's the hard part. Processing the claims takes minutes. Contacting the people is what takes time," Henderson said.

For someone who was home in Omaha less than two weeks ago, Leahy has quickly mastered the county highways and biways. Originally from Michigan by way of Mobile, Ala., Leahy's easy-going southern drawl is both reassuring and respectful. Earlier this year, he coordinated efforts to remove millions of barrels of oil from the ruptured Exxon tanker in Valdez, Alaska.

This is his first trip to quake country.

"These earthquakes really bring you back to earth," he said.

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Leahy's first stop this day is the Seacliff townhouse of Loni Christopherson.

Christopherson's home, although relatively new, suffered substantial damage in the quake. As she recounts her quake-induced woes, Christopherson alternates between sadness and laughter.

"Hopefully we can make your life a little easier," Leahy said.

Christopherson was on Highway 17, traveling home from visiting her ailing mother in Stockton, when the ground started shaking. She couldn't help but smile as she remembered her nightmarish adventure.

"I had my sunroof open and leaves were falling into my lap. My little car was bouncing. We were stopped on 17 and somebody suggested taking Eureka Canyon Road. That was a mistake," she said.

Falling rock quickly trapped her car on that mountainous roadway.

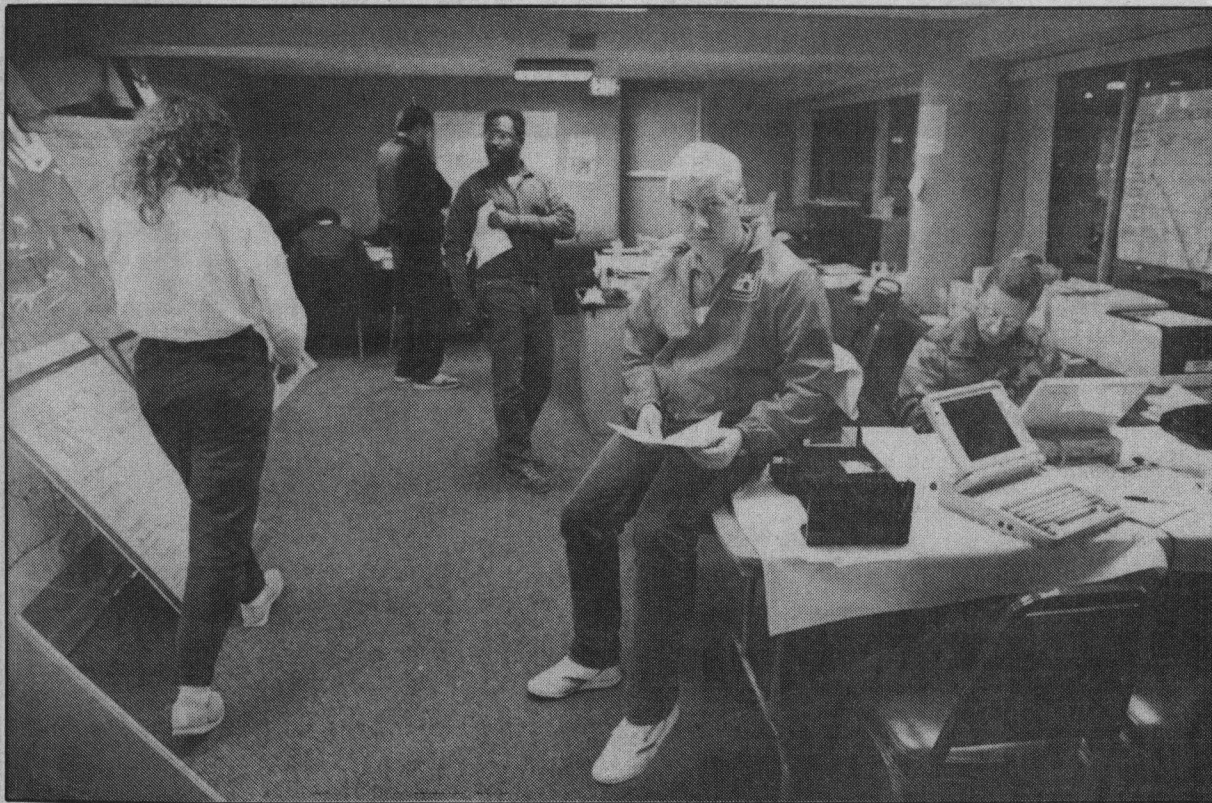
"I had to crawl over boulders, walk over mountains and hitchhike home. When I finally get home, my neighbor is sitting out in front of her place, crying, with a candle. She said, 'Don't go in there.'"

The quake burst Christopherson's second-story hot-water heater, sending hundreds of gallons of water cascading into the ground floor.

Carpets and personal items were ruined. Christopherson had to poke holes in the first-floor ceiling to let water drain out. The fireplace cracked; floor jams buckled; tile popped off. In short, a two-bedroom, two-bath disaster area.

"I was a pretty house," she laughed.

The 16 other units in Christopherson's townhome complex suffered similar damage. The association of



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Army Corps' Larry Leahy, sitting on desk, checked in at Dream Inn headquarters Wednesday.

Three aid programs available

SANTA CRUZ — County residents who suffered any kind of uninsured loss in the Oct. 17 earthquake are eligible for federal assistance.

Three kinds of federal aid are available: temporary housing, rental assistance, individual family grants, and Small Business Association (SBA) loans.

The SBA assistance program includes personal loans, home loans and business loans, said FEMA information officer Bill Villa.

In most cases, loan and grant requests may be taken over the FEMA application hotline at 1-800-462-9029.

The SBA "would rather you go down in person" because its loan applications are a little more complicated, Villa said.

FEMA offices are located in Ben Lomond (9477 Highway 9, former Bank of America building), Santa Cruz (212 Locust St., former Pac Bell building), Watsonville (1985 Main St., Crossroads Shopping Center) and Pajaro (100 Salinas Road,

Our Lady of Ascension Church).

"Anybody that has suffered any kind of uninsured loss, we want them to come down" to the FEMA/SBA office, Villa said. "We have outreach people going out to get these people in to apply."

As of Wednesday, 32,000 county residents have applied for federal grants or loans, Villa said. The application deadline is Dec. 16.

For more information, call 1-800-525-0321.

homeowners is applying for an SBA loan to cover damages to the outside of the townhomes. Interior repairs are up to each individual owner.

"Now we need to get things going and move on," Christopherson said.

His assessment completed, Leahy was ready to issue a check to the Lockheed employee.

"Whoa, that's pretty good," said Christopherson, inspecting a government check for \$2,850. "This is going to help us a lot. I really appreciate this. It will help me quite a bit," she said. "This gives me the chills."

"Far-out groovy," said Christopher's daughter Karen, a Cabrillo College student.

"Some people are in tears when we give them a check. That's the best part of what we do," Corps coordinator Henderson said.

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Dr. Robert Cunnah, whose stately home sits high atop the cliffs of Rio Del Mar, has a breathtaking view of the Monterey Bay. Yet, it is the view below the house that is taking his breath away.

Hundreds of cubic feet of earth plunged down the hillside below Cunnah's home during the quake, leaving his back patio perched precariously on the bluff.

"All it's going to need now is a good rain," Cunnah said. "My only hope is to get a retaining wall in ... A

chimney you can live without, but the hill, if it goes ..."

An SBA loan, Cunnah said, "would really give me piece of mind."

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Later, Leahy returns from inspecting a remote home in a wooded area near Corralitos.

"This here is a sad one," he said quietly. Wholesale quake damage has made the house uninhabitable. The owner definitely qualifies for immediate aid, but the check won't arrive by mail for a few days.

"Sometimes I wish I could just write a check myself," Leahy said.

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Leahy's rounds continue. A broken chimney in Aptos. Dislodged foundations in the Soquel hills. A home near the quake's epicenter was shaken like a rag doll. Leahy takes extra time to work out estimates for building materials with the homeowners.

"I've seen a lot of damaged homes, and it's shocking," Leahy said.

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The assessment process appears to be running smoothly. At the end of the day, engineers good-naturedly rib each other about how many claims they "turned out" that day.

As of Wednesday afternoon, the Corps had processed more than 400 claims for FEMA aid.