

Metro

County's homeless middle class makes the rounds of campgrounds

By Alan Goldstein
The Register

YORBA LINDA — Hoyt Mummert, 29, a \$13-an-hour fork-lift mechanic, lost his Whittier house last August after falling behind in the rent. So he moved his family into a hotel hoping to find a new place.

Mummert is still searching. Unable to pass apartment credit checks or pay hotel bills, Mummert, his wife and three children have been living out of their car for more than two months. At night they've been sleeping in tents in area campgrounds.

The Mummerts are not alone. At least 30 homeless people have been camping at Featherly Regional Park because they say they cannot find or afford other housing.

Featherly is one of number of area parks that have become temporary shelter for some of the county's estimated 4,000 homeless. They remain there despite a county ordinance adopted two years ago aimed at keeping parks from becoming "too residential," said Tom Klems, a Featherly Park ranger.

The ordinance prohibits anyone from staying in county parks for longer than 15 days during any calendar month, Klems said. Once they leave, the ordinance prohibits them from re-entering the park for five days.

The law has created a subculture of middle-class "park people." They wander among

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Elizabeth Robinson, one of the county's "park people"

county, state and federal parks; staying for two weeks, then moving on.

Like the Mummerts, many maintain a substantial and steady income, but were forced out of their homes and could not afford to move into a new one. "Featherly helps a lot of people save money so that they can afford a new place," said Jean Forbath, chairwoman of the county Human Relations Commission. "It helps them tread water."

County supervisors say hotel price increases prompted by the Olympics forced people into area campgrounds. To help them out, supervisors waived the 15-day camping limit until the Olympics end.

But the problem of homeless people living in campgrounds has existed for years, and some county officials scoff at what they call a "shortsighted" approach taken by the supervisors.

"We've been helping people forced to live in Featherly Park for 14 years," said Forbath. "And we've been trying for quite a while to extend the ordinance to 30 or 45 days on a regular basis, not just for the Olympics."

In the meantime, residents will have to abide by time limits set by the park.

"When the games are over, we'll have to start moving again," said Louise Ross, 39, a Featherly resident. "There's a whole circuit of us park people. We see the same people in each place. Every time the 15 days are up, you pick up and move to another park."

Her husband, Eddie, a 50-year-old machinist who earns \$8 an hour at a shop in Anaheim, agreed. "Don't tell me it's the Olympics," he said. "They've been raising the rents like crazy for years. Rent goes up every couple of months, but raises (in personal income) take years."

Park residents who can afford apartments blame their plight on credit checks, security deposits and requests for first and last month's rent. They say credit agencies are less likely to approve blue collar workers who may be more prone to layoffs.

At the Small World Apartments in Bellflower, one of the buildings the Mummerts said they applied to live in, assistant resident manager Cheri Fross said approval on a credit check there requires a minimum gross income of \$2,000 a month and proof of good credit.



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Hettie Elders, 30, the wife of a \$11-an-hour machinist, says her children Amy, 5, and Ted, 2, think their new way of life in Featherly Regional Park is 'like spending their summer with mom and dad at camp.'

HOMELESS: Camping out

Fross said a two-bedroom apartment there rents for \$575 a month. A new tenant who passed the credit check would then have to come up with the first month's rent in advance in addition to a \$325 security deposit.

Mummert said he cannot understand how he could have such a poor credit rating if he has never been in debt. "We don't have any credit cards, and we've never had to borrow money from anybody," Mummert said. "It just doesn't seem fair."

Jack Mattson, a 34-year-old Featherly resident unemployed since April, said he began apartment hunting last July when the owner of his Venice house died and the building was taken over by a

new owner. Mattson said he moved into a hotel, confident his cash reserve would make finding a place easy.

"I went looking for a place with \$2,400 cash and I still couldn't get anything because of those credit checks," he said. Mattson also said he has never borrowed any money and that he holds no credit cards.

For those who have been living in parks for several months, numerous other difficulties can arise out of what they originally saw as a temporary solution. For example, without a permanent residence, a family is not eligible for county welfare assistance. And some transient parents must send their children to a myriad of different schools, if they can send them anywhere at all.

Featherly residents Ron and

Elizabeth Robinson sent their 8-year-old daughter Lydia to three schools since last year, when Robinson was injured in a car accident and lost his job.

"The kids can't go to any school regularly because they don't have no address," said Elizabeth Robinson. "No address means no welfare, no food stamps, no help."

Life for many of the "park people" is no different than for others who pay \$5 a night to vacation at Featherly's 217 campsites. "I've learned how to bake cookies and cakes on an open fire," said Hettie Elders, 30, who moved to Featherly with her \$11-an-hour machinist husband when they lost their apartment.

"The kids really like it. They kind of see it like spending their summer with mom and dad at camp."