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Churches asked to aid homeless

Olympic Housing Network seeks permanent shelters

By Mary Archer
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ANAHEIM — The halls of the Unitarian Church of Orange County are empty now, but not too long ago they housed 15 homeless people, some of whom had been evicted from their motel rooms by an Olympics-related increase in room rates.

These halls, however, may once again be filled — permanently this time — if organizers have their way.

With an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 people left homeless in Orange County each year, organizers of the Olympic Housing Network are hoping some of the 14 churches which participated in the program will consider opening their doors to the homeless permanently.

There is "substantial interest" in the idea and at least four of the 14 churches are "seriously considering it," said Joe Caux, a housing advocate for the Community Development Council and organizer of the Olympic Housing Network.

One of those churches is the Unitarian Church, of which Caux is a member, located on Santa Ana Street near West Street. It was the only church able to provide 24-hour accommodations.

The problem with setting up permanent shelters in churches is logistical, said Mary Ann Gaido, a housing specialist with the Orange County Human Relations Commission. Churches must be able to pro-

vide food, transportation, counseling, shower and bath facilities and have 24-hour service available, she said.

Funds for making these additions and changes must also be found, Caux said.

While the need for temporary housing in Orange County is great, it is merely symptomatic of the need for county-wide affordable housing, Caux said. He said it was "a shame" people who are paying up to \$600 a month to rent a motel room, can't find an apartment, which provides more security and better living facilities, for the same price.

The people mainly affected by the housing shortage are those with four or more family members who earn \$15,000 a year or less, Caux said. People become homeless for a variety of reasons, he said, including battered wives, unemployment and eviction because of inability to pay rent increases.

Some may be employed, but they can't come up with the "cold, hard cash" for the required first and last month's rent and security deposits, Caux said. Others may have just moved into the county and need a place to stay while they look for a job.

The housing network was organized by members of the Housing Coalition of Orange County, an advocacy group of 20 agencies started in 1971.

"Even though the Olympics didn't displace thousands of people as had been expected, I think we all had a good experience in the past three weeks in dealing with the homeless in Orange County," Gaido said.

Only 146 of the 215 spaces available in the network churches were utilized, Gaido said. The first day of the program, July 25, 18 people were placed, Gaido said.

County campgrounds such as Featherly Regional Park in Yorba Linda and O'Neil Park in Irvine have been used as shelters by homeless people for years, but there was an increase during the Olympics because a 15-day use limit was increased by the Board of Supervisors to 30 days to accommodate the expected Olympics-related homeless, Gaido said.