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## Homeless prevention dollars arrive

Federal money will help Contra Costa residents find housing and pay rent

By Rick Radin  
The Contra Costa Times

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It has been a long wait, but the first installment of \$2 million in federal dollars to help people facing eviction has arrived in Contra Costa County.

Renters who can prove financial need are eligible for subsidies to keep them in their apartments or houses or get money to return to housing quickly if they have been evicted.

Homeowners threatened with foreclosure are not eligible for the subsidies, said Tim O'Keefe, director of Shelter Inc., in Martinez, the lead agency among seven participating, including the county's homeless program.

The agencies applied for federal stimulus money and received the grant award in March.

"It's a lot cheaper to prevent people from becoming homeless than to help them after they become homeless," O'Keefe said. "So far, the government has only been helping those who are homeless."

The subsidies are targeted at people who cannot afford their entire rent because they lost their jobs or who have a short-term illness or injury. Applicants must be employed or employable. The subsidy will be paid directly to the landlord to

prevent fraud. The agencies expect to help 800 to 900 renters and the money should last 18 months to two years, O'Keefe said.

Renters throughout the county are eligible. An additional \$1.5 million, from a federal grant to the state, will be earmarked for residents of Pittsburg, Antioch, Concord and Walnut Creek. The first installment of that money should be available later this month, O'Keefe said.

"We can provide a rent subsidy for a couple months or a year and provide supportive services," he said. Other help available includes moving costs and security deposits.

The need to keep people in their housing is great, said John Anderson, president and CEO of the Bay Area Rescue Mission, a privately funded shelter and meal provider in Richmond.

There has been an 15 percent increase in people seeking shelter at the mission this year and 18 percent growth in demand for meals, Anderson said. The mission has 325 beds and serves 4,600 meals a day.

"Our facilities are always at capacity," Anderson said. "During life-threatening weather, we'll go beyond our capacity, not wanting anyone to be left outside."

The county has noticed a major increase in single adults and juveniles coming out of foster care who are homeless for the first time, said Cynthia Belon, director of the county homeless program.

"We've done a good job dealing with chronic homelessness, but we're seeing a huge increase in the recently homeless because of the economy," Belon said. "We're trying to keep the number of newly homeless down."

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