

Jan 7, 1991

# Migrant housing still available

## Families fear losing places in farm camps

By ASHBEL S. GREEN

of The Oregonian staff

FOREST GROVE — Apartments offering temporary housing for migrant farm workers remain half empty, even though families are living in farm camps and on the streets.

"People are concerned about leaving the camps because they're afraid they're not going to have a place to go back to," said Connie Sherrard, self-sufficiency manager for the Washington County Community Action Organization.

The non-profit organization recently opened the Elm Park apartments in Forest Grove to serve migrant farm-worker families who were living in fields, cars or labor camps not designed for the winter.

Community Action has raised more than \$60,000 to open and run the 34-apartment complex that usually houses migrant families during the planting and harvest seasons only.

Although Elm Park has been open since before Christmas, only 15 families have moved into the apartments. Residents are charged rent based on their ability to pay.

Several migrant families were unwilling to leave labor camps for fear of losing their place in the camps when the planting season begins in the spring, Sherrard said. She could not estimate the number of homeless migrants or those living in camps.

"It's hard because we don't want to tell people where to live," Sherrard said.

Tenants will have to leave Elm Park at the end of February so the apartments can be readied to house families for the agricultural season, she said. Elm Park is run as seasonal housing by Housing Development Corp., another private, non-profit organization.

Other problems involve finding housing for illegal migrant families, laborers who do not qualify as farm workers and single, male migrants, she said.

Community Action cannot allow families without U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service papers to live in Elm Park, Sherrard said, because a federal loan paid for the apartment complex.

Many illegal farm workers still are literally out in the cold, she said.

In some cases, migrants with official papers have not held agricultural jobs long enough to qualify as farm workers under INS guidelines, making them ineligible for Elm Park, Sherrard said.

Federal rules allow only families to live in Elm Park, she added. Although most farm workers in Oregon are single men, federal regulations will not allow them to move into the apartments.

Sherrard also expects the housing crunch to worsen. Following the ruining of California's orange crop because of cold weather, she said, more migrant laborers than usual may come to Oregon in search of work, and they may arrive earlier than usual.

Under the Elm Park budget, Community Action planned to hire two case workers to help tenants in the apartment complex. One case worker is on the job. But with a 50 percent vacancy rate in the apartments, the community organization may instead hire an outreach worker to help families in the camps and elsewhere, Sherrard said.

Of the more than \$60,000 raised by Community Action to open the apartments, \$30,000 came from the county Office of Community Development, \$15,000 from the county Housing Authority, \$12,200 from United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, and \$5,000 from the state's share of Federal Emergency Management Agency funds and private donations, she said.