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Businesses still await relief aid

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Financial help has been promised by city, state and federal agencies, but few checks are in the mail to businesses and people displaced by the World Trade Center attacks.

The main agencies providing financial help are the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

City and state agencies are still organizing distribution of the $20 billion in federal aid promised by Washington.

SBA and FEMA, working together, have received thousands of calls for help and have begun processing hundreds of applications for grants and low-interest disaster loans. But they, too, have paid out only a trickle of money.

SBA spokesman Frank Adinolfe said that as of early yesterday, 10 loans had been approved to businesses destroyed or damaged in the attacks. About $500,000 in payments has been approved, although not all of the checks have been issued yet.

A spokesman for FEMA said he did not know of any funds yet paid out by his agency for emergency assistance to individuals affected by the disaster. But he said that 4,700 calls have been received at its registration hotline — (800) 469-9029 — as the first step in applying for SBA loans or direct financial help from FEMA.

"The process will move fast once the applications are submitted," the spokesman said.

Calling the FEMA/SBA registration hotline will expedite the application process, Adinolfe said.

Callers should have their Social Security and taxpayer identification numbers handy, along with a telephone number where they can be reached.

2 Manhattan info centers

Information on how to apply for FEMA and SBA assistance also can be obtained at two walk-in emergency offices in Manhattan set up by the Empire State Development Corp., a state-run agency. Representatives of various city, state and federal officials are on hand to provide information.

The centers are at 633 Third Ave., near 41st St., and 110 Maiden Lane, at Pine St.

A steady stream of people sought help at both centers but didn't always find satisfaction.

Minas Polychronakis, 60, of Astoria, Queens, left the Maiden Lane center shaking his head in disappointment yesterday.

For 25 years, he owned Minas Shoe Repair in the concourse of the World Trade Center, along with two other shops in the Financial District. He and his workers all escaped after the terror attacks.

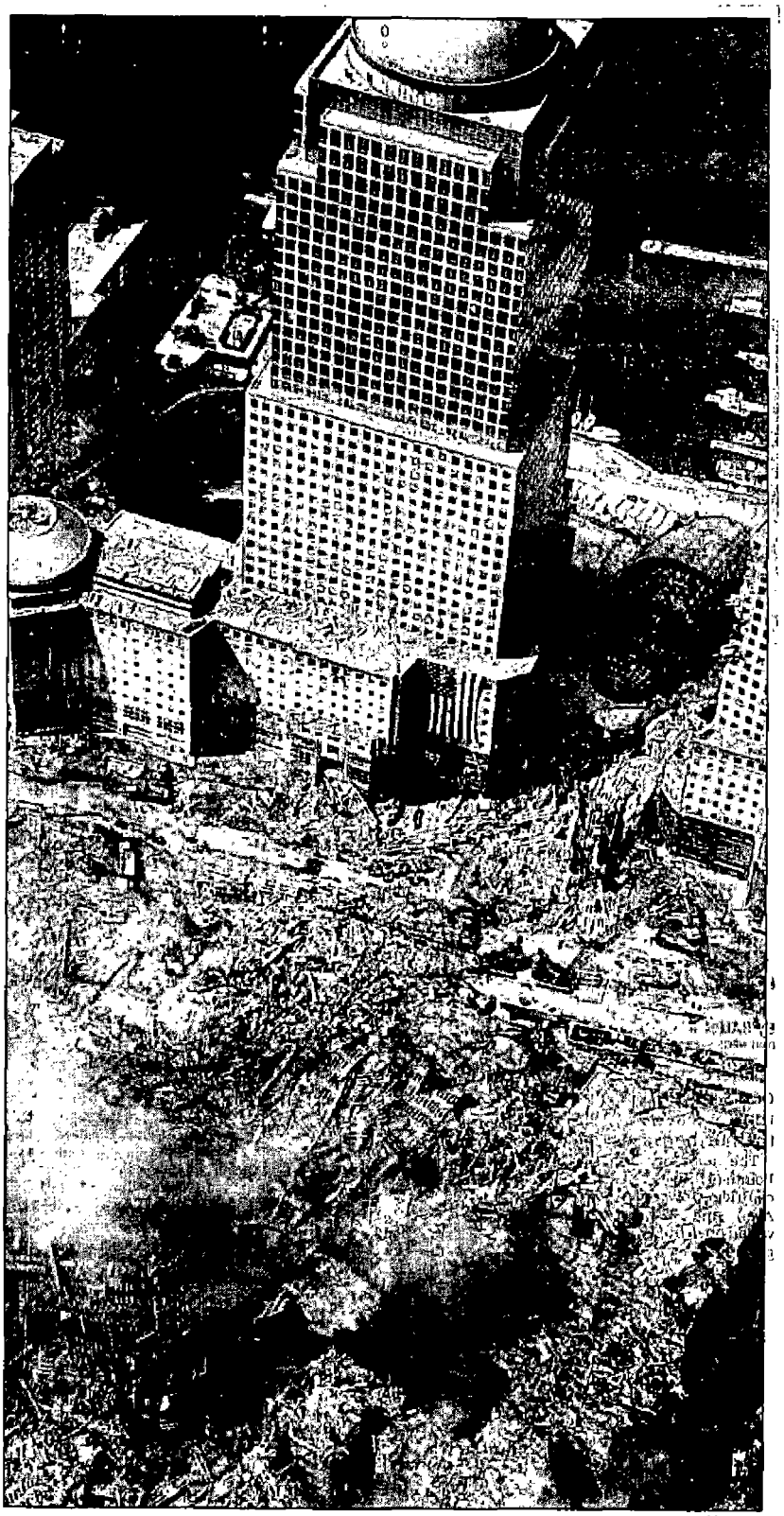
But now Polychronakis is looking for grants to help keep his two remaining shops — which are just reopening — in business. "Loans you have to pay back, and I don't know if I'm going to be able to do that. Half the people don't want to come back to Wall Street," he said.

Xiaowen Chen, owner of Nagoya, a Japanese fast-food restaurant at 63A Reade St., a few blocks north of the collapsed towers, was more hopeful after visiting the Maiden Lane resource center. Chen said she was grateful for the information she was given on applying for an SBA loan.

Councilwoman Kathryn Freed, who represents lower Manhattan, said owners of small businesses are complaining they've had a hard time getting information.

"They are being told it will take five to six weeks to get their [SBA] loans and by then they'll all be in bankruptcy," she said.

But Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-Brooklyn) said she has been assured by SBA officials that applications, once received, will be processed within 21 days.



POOL PHOTO

GROUND ZERO Businesses and individuals hit by the World Trade Center disaster are anxiously awaiting the delivery of promised economic assistance from a variety of government agencies.

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