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WEST MILFORD

SOS appeals ruling to preserve its bus route

BY DONNA ROLANDO
Staff Writer

With the opening day of school fast approaching, the Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS) women's shelter is hoping that the state will act quickly to preserve busing for shelter children attending both Marshall Hill and Omni Day schools.

But right now the timetable rests with the state Department of Education (DOE), which SOS petitioned in late July to intervene in its busing battle with the local school board. DOE spokesman Richard Vespucci said the SOS complaint against the Board of Education, which reached the state on Aug. 1, did not specify that it is of an emergent nature.

The opportunity exists to modify the complaint so that children might have their busing restored in time for school, but SOS would have to make that request, he said.

SOS founder Sandra Ramos said that she thought that the petition to the state commissioner of education did denote urgency, and that she would look into the matter.

Without a rush put on the complaint, Vespucci said that the matter would go through an administrative process "similar to what happens in a court of law." The Board of Education has until Aug. 21, or thereabouts, to respond to the SOS "petition of appeal." Then the matter typically goes to administrative law judges to arrive at a recommendation for the state commissioner, who makes the final decision, said Vespucci.

"We reviewed the petition and we don't think it has any merit,"

said Business Administrator Steve Cea. Still the school district is preparing its response for the state.

Cea said that the district's reasons for terminating the transportation have not changed since a *Suburban Trends* interview on the conflict earlier this year.

During that interview, Cea said that this busing would be cut because of rising fuel costs and the fact that just a handful of children traveled each day to after-school care at Omni Day School on Union Valley Road. He said it did not make financial sense to run a bus from Marshall Hill to Omni, which it considers too far for so few kids.

Ramos, founder of the domestic violence shelter in West Milford and another in Wanaque, estimated that 15 school-age shelter children might attend Omni Day School during an academic year but this number is always changing as families transition and the changes can't be helped.

"They (the school district) sent us a letter in May discontinuing the transportation we so desperately need," said Ramos. "You only have a certain amount of time to appeal," she said, so SOS filed its petition and now is awaiting a state response.

Like Cea, SOS is concerned about economics as it impacts shelter families. SOS owns Omni so shelter families are able to get after-school care there at an affordable price. This care is essential for moms trying to return to work or get the education they need to do so, SOS members said.

As part of its petition, SOS suggested a last resort - moving the

students to Westbrook School so they would be within reach of busing to Omni. The move would make sense, Ramos said, because although SOS children have attended Marshall Hill for years, other children who live in the shelter neighborhood go to Westbrook.

However, she said, "We prefer to keep them where they are," since Marshall Hill provides special education programs that benefit this population.

Another issue being raised with the DOE deals with the educational placement of SOS children as governed by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which requires that homeless students have an advocate to represent them in their school district.

The chief of staff at SOS has been told that Cea is West Milford's advocate, and it's a designation that makes her wonder.

Lena Lamontagne, education director and chief of staff for SOS, said, "According to the act, in every school district where there's a shelter involved, they should assign an advocate to advocate for the families." She didn't consider it a conflict for Cea to fill the spot but thought that an advocate would have experience working with homeless populations.

In an interview Friday, Cea said that the Homeless Assistance Act has nothing to do with after-school programs. As the homeless liaison, Cea said it is his job to see to the educational placement of homeless children.

Donna Rolando's e-mail address is rolando@northjersey.com.

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