



DANIELLE P. RICHARDS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Shelter operator Sandra Ramos, pictured in August, says she expects to win her fight with West Milford.

Many of SOS' expansions have been controversial. It clashed with the West Milford zoning board in 1997 and challenged the township in court over a day-care center and a women's shelter.

During Tuesday night's vigil, shelter residents sang songs, shared stories, and urged officials to keep the shelters open.

Theresa Roman, a 36-year-old shelter resident, recalled abuse by men while she was homeless in

South Jersey, before she moved to a shelter here in July.

The other women murmured and nodded in recognition.

"We're beautiful. We're smart. We need a chance," Roman said. "We need a safe space to live."

But township officials say that's their goal, too: ensuring that the buildings run by Strengthen Our Sisters are safe.

The only way to be sure, they say, is to keep up with the codes

set by the state.

"I'm very sympathetic, and I appreciate what they are doing," said Kurt Wagner, the township's construction code official. "But then, if they don't comply or pay the fees, then what about the churches, the American Legion, the Salvation Army? This could go on forever. It's like everybody else: They have to obey the law."

E-mail: carroll@northjersey.com