

# The West Milford Messenger

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# Busing issue creates feud

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Children are no longer taken by bus from Omni Day School to Marshall Hill School

West Milford - A pre-hearing conference on Thursday, Sept 25, will bring the township school district, Strengthen Our Sisters and a Passaic County administrative law judge together to determine if children can be transported from the Omni Day School to Marshall Hill School on a township bus.

Omni is operated by SOS for the children who live in the group's shelter, although a few children from the community also attend.

Michaelene Loughlin of the law firm of Loughlin and Latimer in Hackensack, filed a motion for emergency relief so the children at Omni can ride the bus until the grown-ups reach a permanent solution.

Board of Education Business Administrator Steven Cea explained the children staying at SOS are assigned to Marshall Hill School, but Omni is not on a regular bus route for Marshall Hill. Lena Lamontagne of SOS said there was never a formal agreement with the district. Buses from certain schools drop children off at certain day care centers, she noted, and the children at Omni were transported to Marshall Hill.

Cea said he warned the staff of SOS last year there might not be a bus for those children. In May 2008, the board decided not to provide a bus from the Omni Day School to Marshall Hill School.

Cea explained no bus passes Omni heading for Marshall Hill School. The "big buses," 52-passenger traditional yellow school vehicles, run on specific routes, picking up the children who live in the designated attendance area for each of the township's six elementary schools. The vans, 16-passenger vehicles that transport special education students, pick up children from anywhere in the township and drop them off at the school that offers the proper program to fill their needs.

Until last year, one of these vans stopped at Omni. During the 2007-2008 school year there was no special education class at Marshall Hill, but the district transported the Omni students anyway. There is a special education class at Marshall Hill School this year, but Cea explained the bus transporting those children does not pass Omni, but does pass SOS. He said it picks up children in the Apshawa area and takes Macopin Road to Union Valley Road and the school.

Omni is on Union Valley Road, but south of its intersection with Macopin. SOS is north of the intersection and closer to Marshall Hill.

The SOS motion alleges district bus 108 does pass Omni on its way to Marshall Hill.

According to the motion filed by Loughlin, without district busing, the director of Omni must transport children from the day care center to SOS in the morning to be picked up for school and then pick them up at SOS and take them back to Omni after school. This is a problem since SOS doesn't have a vehicle for this purpose, according to the motion. The SOS staff transports the mothers in residence to their jobs and appointments, according to the motion.

The motion claims the district's decision was a cost-cutting measure and calls it a "patently arbitrary, capricious and unreasonable refusal to continue to provide transportation for the homeless children to and from Omni."

Business Administrator Steven Cea said the district helped SOS certify their vehicles for the transportation of children. "It's not difficult to transport fewer than 16 children at one time," he said, "you don't need a yellow school bus." He also said the district agreed to do a mid-day run for kindergarteners from Marshall Hill to Omni.