

# SUBURBAN TREND

ER OF YOUR COMMUNITY ♦ SUNDAY, AUGUST 1, 2004 ♦ 50 CENTS NEWSST

## WEST MILFORD

# SOS hit with \$500K in fines

BY SHARBARI BOSE  
Staff Writer

A collection notice for \$500,000 working its way through the postal system to the Sunflower House, a senior shelter for local homeless women.

Sandra Ramos, director of a chain of upper Passaic County safe havens called Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS), labels the fine "punitive." In fact, she's right.

Ramos purchased Sunflower House two years ago to accommodate her older boarders, but she underestimated one major detail.

The two-story, eight-bedroom home, also known as Carousel, is located on Old Route 23 in a neighborhood commercial zone. Unfortunately, the town's land development ordinance excludes shelters in its list of allowable establishments for this designation.

"It's just something that's not permitted," Zoning Officer Jim Lupo said.

SOS filed for a use variance with the zoning board of adjustment in April and faced an Aug. 29 deadline for approval. This past Tuesday's appearance was crucial for two reasons: Not much time remained until deadline and the rezoning had already received several extensions.

So on July 27, when SOS's pro

bono attorney George J. Cotz faxed over a midday request to reschedule, board officials lost their patience.

"Certainly, as deadlines approach, I become more concerned with adjournment because I don't want any default approvals," Board Attorney Stephen Glatt said.

On Tuesday night, the board dismissed the shelter's application without prejudice and without any SOS representatives present.

"Please don't misunderstand," said Board Chairman Robert Brady. "It (the application) has not been turned down, has not been denied."

Reapplying is an option, but it's also little comfort for the money-starved nonprofit.

The board's five-to-one vote gave Lupo the go-ahead to uphold a \$1,000 daily fine, which started accumulating in Feb. 2003. He contends that SOS has violated local statutes regarding improper use for the entire 16-month period, or roughly 540 days.

The senior home also lacks a current certificate of occupancy from the township's building department, he said.

"The town's just trying to give us a hard time," Ramos responded on

## SOS

FROM PAGE A1

Thursday, unaware that the application had been dropped. "We're going to fight it. We're not going to pay the fine."

Ramos claims that Sunflower's use as a boarding house, like the original Newfoundland Bed and Breakfast, never changed. Still, she followed the board's earlier demands to see a license from the NJ Department of Human Services that verifies Sunflower's shelter status.

DHS mailed in a letter saying that the state's community affairs department (DCA) actually issues licenses to shelters. The DCA, on the other hand, won't grant the license until the township's gives its approval.

"Everything's between a rock

and a hard place," Ramos said, adding that the township itself caused unnecessary delays.

Cotz, a municipal attorney in Sloansburg, N.Y., has some hand in the delays as well. Yet he believes that his contentions are valid.

In April, he refused to let the board vote on the variance because it lacked a quorum.

The following month, he filed an interpretation seeking to clarify the state's definition of a shelter. He argued that a provision in the Municipal Land Use Law gives shelters with 15 or more boarders the right to be situated in any zone.

Another lawyer, who wished to remain anonymous, has come aboard to represent SOS. It's uncertain whether the extra representative will speed up the process or hinder it further.

Though Ramos has operated in

northern New Jersey since 1987, the three West Milford shelters out of a total seven in the area run into constant municipal fire. All three face pending violations from the zoning, building and health departments.

"It would be easy if she was doing the right things... but she refuses to," Lupo said.

The group home director shot back that she's trying to do as much as possible to please the township and feed her women, both of which are under extensive budgetary constraints.

"We gave the township everything they wanted," she said. "We're eventually going to win. These women are our mothers, our sisters and our daughters."

Sharbari Bose's e-mail is  
bose@northjersey.com

SEE SOS, PAGE A7

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 18, 2004

LOCAL

# Shelter

From Page L-1

else not to comply. That's not what we're here for."

After repeated zoning board hearings about the Sunflower House, frustrated officials this month fined the group \$1,000 a day, and \$500 a week, retroactive to when its certificate of occupancy was revoked in February 2003. Strengthen Our Sisters and the township will meet again in court Sept. 9, when a judge will decide whether the fine stands.

"Is it more important to file the right piece of paper, or save a senior who is just hanging on?" said Sandra Ramos, director of Strengthen Our Sisters. "I'll pick the senior."

The fine is the latest skirmish in a growing battle between township officials and Strengthen Our Sisters. Officials say the problems go beyond missing paper work.

"They have ignored us," said Jim Lupo, the township's zoning officer.

Officials say the organization has flouted the rules, moving too many women into buildings that violate health and zoning codes.

Although the group has made speedy repairs to address officials' concerns in many cases, it has also failed to appear before boards or in municipal court.

Ramos says the problems stem from her organization's limited resources. Strengthen Our Sisters depends on pro-bono lawyers, who must often address paying clients' concerns first. She also noted that construction permits require \$2,000 — a \$500 fee and \$1,500 in escrow funds.

"There are code issues in probably every building in West Milford," she said. "Everything they told us, we have worked diligent-

ly to do."

She believes that township officials are targeting her organization's operations. Neither of the organization's buildings in Wanage have any outstanding code violations, said Jeffrey Brusco, construction and zoning official.

"I want the town to stop making road blocks for us and honor the work that we are doing," she said. "These beautiful women would otherwise have nowhere else to stay. They want us to get out of town, and we're not leaving."

None of the buildings pose an immediate danger, officials said. Many of the problems are minor. For example, before they are given away, unregistered donated cars are stored at residences in West Milford, breaking local zoning codes.

But others are serious. The organization has renovated its buildings without permits, construction officials said. At the Treasures thrift shop on Lincoln Avenue, fire code officials have issued numerous violations because they found merchandise blocking aisles and fire exits.

"The only way we took care of Treasures was to [temporarily] shut it down," said Mike Woch, township fire marshal. "They are stretched too thin. They take on too many things at one time. If they would concentrate on one building, there probably wouldn't be a problem."

Ramos, whose free-wheeling, anti-bureaucratic style has yielded results and controversy throughout North Jersey, said that the needs for women's services outpace funding. That forces a sharp prioritization that puts the immediate needs of women above permits and paperwork.

"We want to comply," Ramos said. "We try to do everything they want us to do. It's just that we don't have the money."

Ramos is the founder of Shelter Our Sisters, the Bergen County shelter for battered women that was the first such center in the county. She left in the late Eighties, after she clashed with the trustees of the successful organization. She helped found Strengthen Our Sisters in the early Nineties, postponing a planned retirement to address the needs of Passaic County women.

The group was initially funded by a \$350,000 state grant and her own contributions. Today, private donations and grants fund its activities.

Ramos had long sought a shelter dedicated to elderly women. Elderly women did not generally thrive in traditional shelters, which cater to mothers with young children. The Old Route 23 location was made available when its owner, a Shelter Our Sisters volunteer, began offering rooms in her home to elderly women in need.

"They came to my rescue," said resident Isabelle, 69, still soft-spoken and bone-thin after surviving pancreatic cancer last year. Drugs to treat the disease cost \$1,000 a month, draining her savings. She was evicted and moved to the shelter this spring.

Her project this summer: add weight to her 89-pound, 5-foot frame, and get ready to teach day-care classes in the fall.

"It's a haven for us right now, when we're in need," she said. "In time, we'll work forward and pass by our obstacles."

E-mail: carrol@northjersey.com