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2004

WEST MILFORD

# Reprieve for battered women's shelter granted

BY SHARBARI BOSE  
Staff Writer

They spent two days picketing at Town Hall. Now, residents of a local battered women's shelter can celebrate dodging a serious threat: Municipal fines.

On Thursday, Judge George Cluff gave Strengthen Our Sisters, Inc. 60 days to repair internal fire code violations at its senior home in lieu of paying a \$40,000 penalty.

"It sounds like an offer you can't refuse," he said.

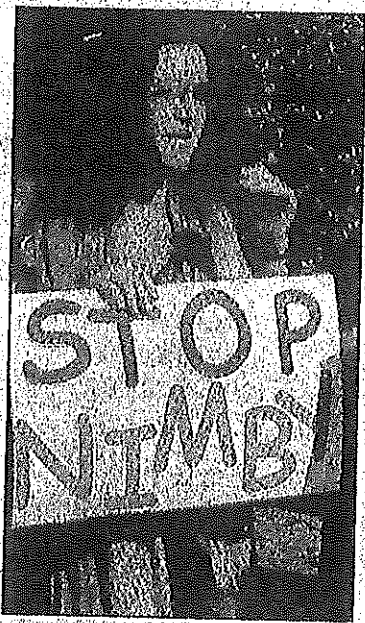
Before this week, the Strengthen Our Sisters (SOS) chain of Passaic County shelters faced a total of \$600,000 in fines for building and zoning noncompliance issues at its senior Sunflower House on Old Route 23.

When SOS Director Sandra Ramos opened its doors in December 2002, she failed to acquire the proper certificate of occupancy (CO), officials say. That move led to an endless tug-of-war over what was right: Enforcing the town's uniform safety codes or cutting a money-starved shelter some slack?

"It would be easy if she was doing the right things," Zoning Officer Jim Lupo said last month. "But she refuses to."

Ramos, founder of the country's first battered women's shelter, says that while she doesn't want to skirt the law, she can't afford to follow it either. SOS only brings in \$1 million annually from private donations and various grants; the recent fines far exceed what she can pay.

While she's filed the proper



PHOTO/SHARBARI BOSE

Sandra Ramos pickets in front of Town Hall.

paperwork, Ramos is also heavily dependent on her pro bono lawyer's schedule; he works as a municipal attorney in Sloatsburg, NY -- a paid position.

"The town is guilty of not having its priorities in order," Ramos said at Tuesday night's speak-out and candlelight vigil. "Their priority is control... but we are serving women. We just don't have the money."

Her fear of going bankrupt is temporarily quieted.

At the Sept. 23 court hearing, Township Prosecutor Thomas

Kaczka and George Cotz, the non-profit's attorney, spent almost two hours privately negotiating a compromise. The final deal allows Ramos to bypass the \$40,000 -- a charge issued for boarding residents at Sunflower without an official CO.

"We've reached a tentative resolution with the township," Cotz said. "I hope that we're essentially done with this."

The fine had accumulated at a \$500 per week rate since February 2003.

From that time, SOS also has been unable to install a fire escape in order to meet the town's safety codes. The work required a permit that the township couldn't issue without the elusive CO, which Sunflower lacks because of its location in a residential area, Lupo said.

This second violation, handed out for SOS's illegal operation of the senior boarding house in a designated residential zone, leaves Ramos with an outstanding \$530,000 penalty.

She applied for a use variance with the zoning board of adjustment only this April, following 16 months of Sunflower's technically illegal use. After a series of postponements, another scheduling conflict left Cotz missing in action at a crucial board hearing last month.

So members dismissed the application without prejudice.

"I don't want any default

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# SOS

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approvals," said Chairman Robert Brady, as he faced an approaching deadline.

Thursday's decision, however, essentially waives the township regulation that requires zoning board approval for a work permit, Kaczka said. SOS could therefore pick up the necessary permit on the morning of Sept. 24.

Kurt Wagner, the town's chief construction official, said that once the fire escape, sprinklers and alarms are updated, SOS would be eligible for a temporary certificate of occupancy (TCO).

A TCO is an imposing letter away from the real thing. To get a CO, Ramos may have to reapply for a change of use with the board of adjustment.

But she's calm for now. "We've collected over 2,000 signatures on a circulating petition," Ramos said. "I figure if you try everything, something will work."

She's even considered filing a federal lawsuit if the second helter fire isn't dropped. Coiz is against it.

"I'm sure Sandy would rather want to work something out in an amicable way," he said. "I would certainly..."

This week's protests suggest that "Sandy" isn't about to back down

so easily.

On Tuesday night, about 30 shelter residents, staff members and volunteers gathered in front of Town Hall and held signs that read: "We protect what you reject," and "Get tough on batterers, not battered women's shelters."

Some returned on Thursday afternoon to picket before the court hearing.

"I didn't know how to protect myself and I didn't know the law," said one town resident, preferring to remain anonymous, about her 24-year marriage to an abuser. "Thank God, now I'm happily divorced."

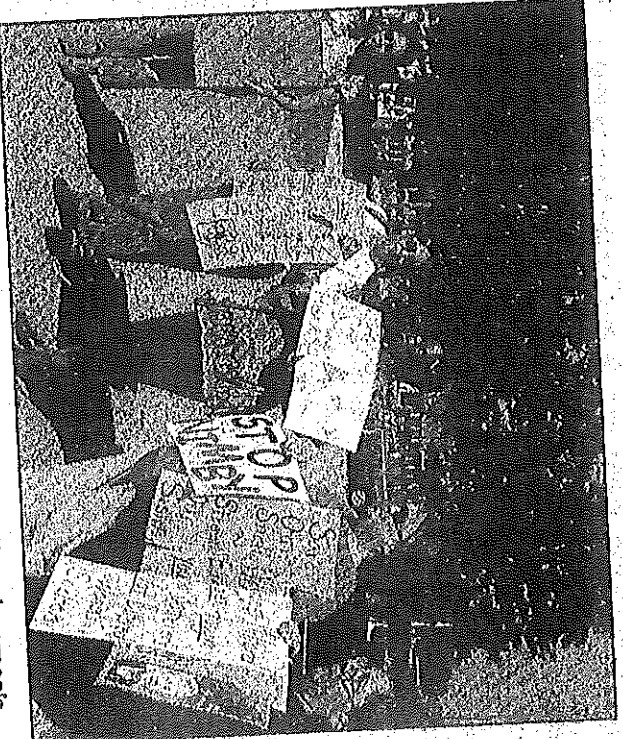
Without SOS's legal advice, she said she wouldn't have had the courage to leave her ex-husband. He still lives in town.

Meanwhile Jaquelyn Ahotto, an independent filmmaker from Edgewater, filmed the women for a documentary about domestic violence called "Rule of Thumb."

So far, she's visited eight different shelters across the country and found that the trend is the same.

"For some reason, the towns don't support the shelters," Ahotto said. "In every state, they've cut the funding."

West Milford officials respond that their fines aren't part of some conspiracy to close the SOS or drive it out of town. They say the residents aren't victims of bureaucracy, but rather, citizens who must



Supporters of SOS picket on behalf of the battered women's shelter.

abide by universal rules.

"The township is not concerned with money," Kaczka said. "... (but) the safety of the people at the building."

Founded in 1987, SOS has a total of seven facilities in Passaic County split between West Milford and neighboring Wanauque.

It provides shelter, counseling, job skills, parenting classes and computer training for about 155 residents.

As of this month, nine seniors live at the two-storied Sunflower House.

The home is just one of a several sites that have encountered problems with the township. In the past, SOS's gift shop, children's daycare and main shelter received summonses for fire and health code violations.

Repairs on a failing septic system at one site must begin by Oct. 4 to avoid additional fines.