

Ramos fights to keep unemployment benefits

By Dan M. Bergin
Staff Writer

Sandra Ramos, the former director of the Shelter Our Sisters (SOS) homes for battered women, continues to be embroiled in a fight to retain her unemployment benefits as inconclusive hearings with state officials continue.

The board of directors of SOS, which fired Ms. Ramos in January for a half-dozen alleged abuses of her office, is appealing a decision by the state Department of Labor and Industry granting the shelter's founder \$214 in weekly compensation.

Ms. Ramos has steadfastly maintained she is innocent of all charges and, in addition to challenging the board's appeal of her benefits, has also filed a lawsuit in

state Superior Court seeking reinstatement to her \$25,000 a year job.

"There's nothing really new" in the case, said Patrick J. Kiernan, Ms. Ramos' attorney, noting that the board of directors has called eight witnesses over two administrative hearing dates thus far and is scheduled to call eight more before completing its case.

"He (Kiernan) completely showed that the witnesses were lying," said Ms. Ramos in a telephone interview last Friday in which she blasted the SOS directors for spending the shelter's legal funds to fight her unemployment benefits.

Ms. Ramos said she had contacted two state senators, Matthew Feldman (D-37) and Gerald Cardinale (R-39), about the shelter's use of funds for legal action in the unemployment case.

At press time, Feldman could not be reached for comment but Cardinale said he would ask for a "structured" financial analysis of the unemployment battle, claiming that the shelter's cost in Ms. Ramos' unemployment compensation

was about \$100 and that attorney's fees to fight the award could end up in the thousands of dollars.

"I can only ask the appropriate questions. Perhaps we can exert some moral pressure," Cardinale said Friday.

\$3,000 fee so far

According to Gail Mitchell, SOS attorney, the board's legal fees to date approach \$3,000. She said her firm, Gladstone and Hart of Hackensack, is representing the SOS directors at a 20 percent discounted fee because it is a non-profit social agency. SOS maintains a \$6,000 budget for legal expenses, she said.

Ms. Mitchell contends that challenging the validity of Ms. Ramos' unemployment benefits is closely tied to the former director's civil action and may affect a final decision in Superior Court.

Citing New York case law, Ms. Mitchell said a decision permitting the award of unemployment benefits can be

viewed as a refutation of the board's dismissal charges in pending civil action. Although she said she knows of no similar cases which may be applied in New Jersey, the lawyer said the principle of "collateral estoppel" or "res adjudicata" may extend to Ms. Ramos' case in Superior Court if the board loses its unemployment appeal.

"That's why we take this so seriously. The money is secondary to the importance of the case," she said.

Court review possible

"This is such a complex and complicated matter that it takes time," Kiernan said, adding that no new hearing dates have been scheduled. Meanwhile, Ms. Ramos continues to receive weekly benefits pending the outcome of the appeal.

Kiernan, an associate of noted Hackensack criminal attorney Frank Luciana

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