

Lack of COs threatens to KO shelter

Officials' pressure destabilizes ready chaotic lives of residents

CAROL FLETCHER
& DONNA ROLANDO
Staff Writers

Tell Glamiris Cabiera, the mother of three young girls and a refugee from domestic violence, that she might have to uproot her family from a Wanaque shelter, and old feelings of insecurity rise.

In a world where Cabiera must minister to tumor-stricken 3-year-old Hannah "24/7" and see her undergo twice-a-month surgical apings of reemerging growths, Strengthen Our Sisters shelter in Wanaque has given them both a better life.

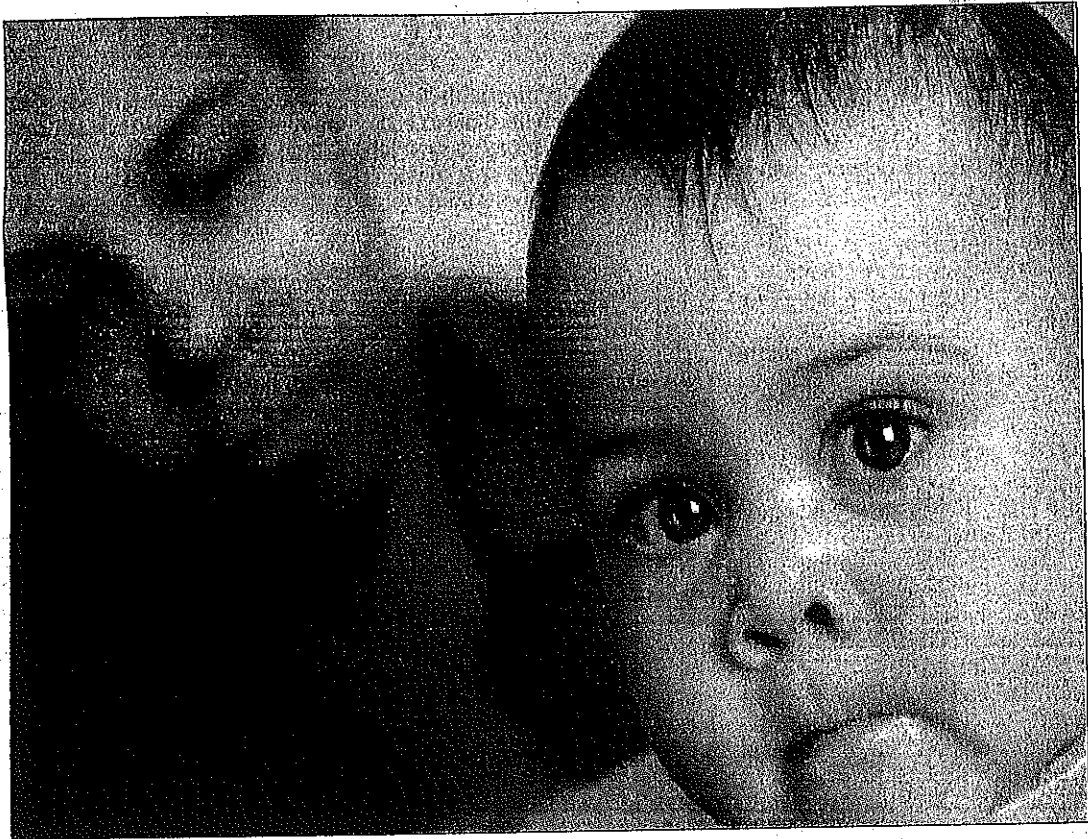
It was there that she gained the confidence to learn to drive. And it was there that she found a neighborhood supportive enough to renovate a shelter apartment to make it clean enough for Hannah, who breathes through a tracheotomy tube.

Cabiera had started to "feel better for the first time in my life," after almost eight months at the shelter, but then an emotional setback - word spread Thursday that many as 13 women and children had been ordered to leave by town and state officials. Cabiera worried she could be displaced, but it was hard to find out for sure during the day's confusion.

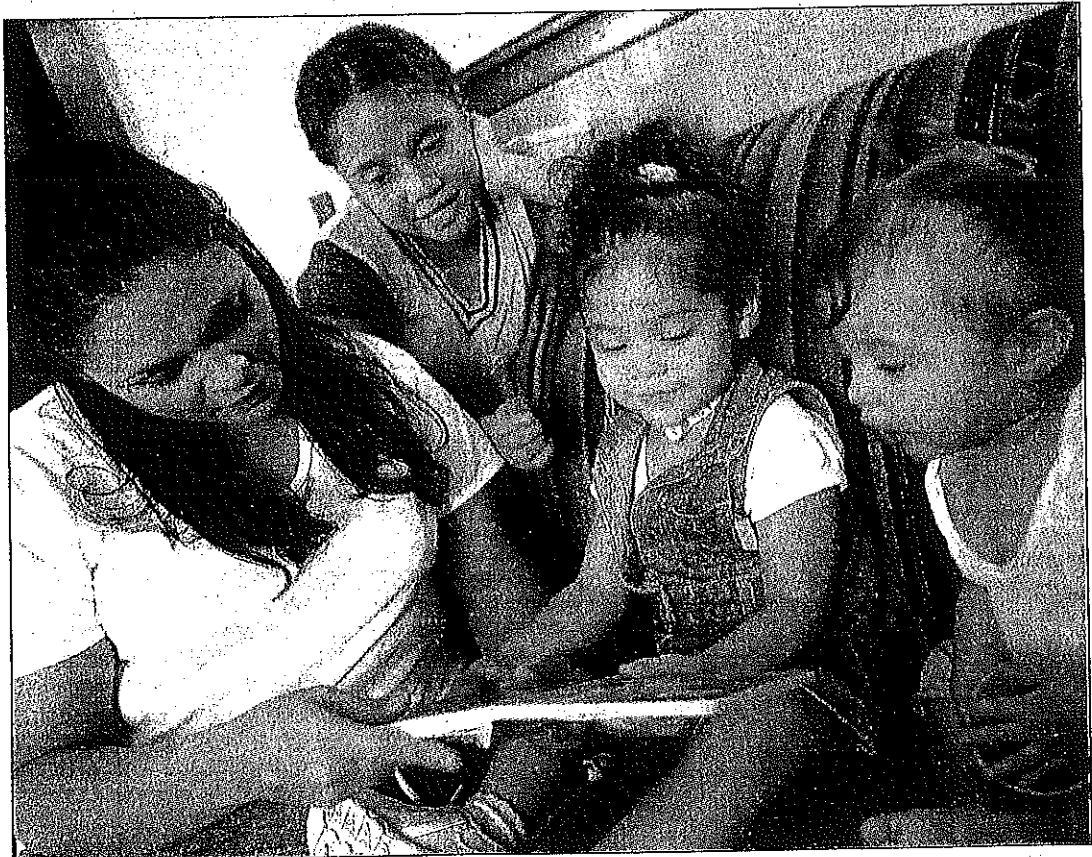
News spread like shock waves through Wanaque's three shelter buildings, coming to Cabiera "just when I was getting to feel freedom and be able to say to myself I can make it with my girls." She recalls that she had left a comfortable Bergen County home to escape a husband she says was abusive and spent her almost a prisoner.

"I didn't get anything in writing that they're not going anywhere," said Ramos, who also marched to the municipal building in an attempt to get answers. They're living here. Their lives are here."

It launched SOS founder Sandra Ramos into an hours-long telephone campaign with county, state and local officials that ended an unofficial reprieve from the order.



Glendaly Campusano and her baby Kelin were among those threatened with ouster from the Wanaque shelter in light of an order those at Strengthen Our Sisters spent hours trying to understand. The shelter has operated at the site for seven years but heard Thursday that as many as 13 women and children had to pack up and leave.



Reading from the storybook "Goodnight Moon," Glamiris Cabiera, who left a comfortable home

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"I addressed that to their (SOS's) attorney, but there is no need for use variances," said Fiorello.

When asked why the borough never pressed for COs before, Fiorello replied, "I can't say. We don't check for the state Department of Community Affairs certification unless an issue arises."

DCA initially brought up COs to Ramos in a January letter saying it would forgo \$10,000 in penalties if had brought against SOS for not being licensed if Ramos gets "state-required" licenses and COs for all its shelters.

In that letter, DCA Commissioner Susan Bass Levin acknowledges it had just given Ramos a grant to "encourage and assist you in the good work that you are doing to help women and children in need."

She goes on to say, "Please be assured that we very much appreciate the good work you are doing. But we cannot emphasize too strongly how important it is that you comply with building and licensing laws that exist to protect the health and safety of the people you are trying to help."

Fiorello said the COs, which require plans of Ramos' three buildings, were needed "so police would know what was going on" there. He said the homes have an amber light outside that could annoy neighbors, and suggested that police often have to answer calls at the shelters. He also cited problems with speeding cars in the area and garbage in the streets.

Under Brusco's Oct 5 orders for both a CO and a use variance, Ramos was told she needs to send the borough 20 architectural plans, 20 surveys, and another 20 plans for a use variance for each of her three buildings. And, she must get approvals from six-plus agencies for all three shelters.

"One hand doesn't know what the other is doing," said Ramos. She said Brusco had repeatedly told them orally that they never needed a CO. Brusco didn't return multiple calls last week asking for a status.

"We're trying to serve people. In 1970, I, as a public citizen, took care of what was a public problem," said Ramos, who began the shelter by taking women into her private home. Baker said on Thursday that

there is no state law requiring the shelter to be licensed. The DCA couldn't be reached for a comment in time for publication.

"It's advantageous to be licensed," said Baker. "Part of it has to do with appearance. You have more credibility."

Furthermore, Baker sent a letter to Fiorello and Brusco on Thursday asking for confirmation on her interpretation of Wanague code that states a CO is only required for new or altered buildings. Because SOS has neither a new or altered building, she said, she felt the borough couldn't order SOS to get one for each building.

Fiorello and Brusco couldn't be reached in time for comment. "We're doing our best to comply," she said, "but we can't get a straight answer from Wanague whether we need a CO or not."

Lives in limbo

Though allowed to stay at the Wanague shelter for now, the families are left to wonder when a new threat might arise.

Mandy Reuter, a native West Milford resident who fled violence in Florida, feared having to pull her children from school.

"I lost my home because my husband was doing drugs," she said. She hopes her first-grade daughter can remain in Wanague Schools. "She's established. She likes her teacher," Reuter said both her children didn't want to leave their dad, but are now planting new roots.

"Emotionally, for the kids to move from place to place, is unfair," she said.

She also talked about the difficulty of finding a job when one's residence is in flux.

"I was supposed to be starting a job soon. If we move somewhere else it could put everything on the back burner," she said. "It just makes it harder for us to get on our feet."

Amnika Downer, a 26-year-old Freehold woman, had an abusive boyfriend but especially appreciates how SOS has supported her effort to stay clean from drugs.

Downer never did drugs, she said, until she attended Seton Hall University and fell into the college party scene. Now every day she draws on support meetings or drug rehabilitation to fortify her fight. She gets to her meetings with help from SOS members, who are also

helping her return to school. "In the end I want to be a drug and alcohol counselor," she said, "I don't want anyone to go through what I have."

The scare was not the first for SOS shelters. A few weeks ago, the state Division of Youth & Family Services ordered 45 to 50 teens and infants from shelters in Wanague and West Milford because that SOS did not have the proper license to harbor teenage moms and their babies. DYFS raised this concern even though some of the moms had lived at the shelter for about two years.

Subsequently, DYFS added fire safety to its concerns, saying that measures like a fire escape are needed in the West Milford shelter before the girls and their babies can return. Ramos, however, is still hoping to welcome them back.

Amidst all the battles over SOS's right to serve, Ramos said the real mission of the group gets pushed aside. "We're doing all that they tell us but we could spend our lives on paperwork and people could die at our feet," she said.