

State Threatens

To Fire Hospital Head

Discusses Safety Hazards

By Wayne Deleo
Associate Editor

The state has threatened to fire the director of Bronx Developmental Center for discussing potentially fatal safety hazards at the facility for the handicapped and retarded with a local assemblyman. However, attempts to remove the director were forestalled at least temporarily when a member of the Joseph Kennedy family contacted the state commissioner of mental retardation to urge against his dismissal, informed sources told the News last week.

Dr. Herbert Cohen, the director of the facility, toured the center with Assemblyman Guy Velella to accentuate and discuss existing safety hazards at the \$26.9 million center. Shortly thereafter, Velella wrote to Governor Carey to ask him to look into safety conditions at the center.

Velella and State Senator John D. Calandra have both been active in working to get conditions improved at Bronx Developmental.

Velella wrote to Governor Carey in mid-January on his behalf and Calandra's to inform Carey that the Board of Visitors of the center, which serves as the governor's liaison with the facility, has been misinforming him on conditions at the center.

Then in late January, an aid to the governor, Robert Morgado, wrote back to Velella indicating that "hazardous and potentially fatal conditions do not exist" at Bronx Developmental.

Based on this response, Velella decided to personally tour the center, which led to his writing to Carey for a second time to reaffirm that potentially dangerous conditions do exist at the facility.

One hazard at the center, according to the Velella letter, is contained in the facility's high temperature steam system, which carries pressurized steam at 400 degrees. Velella charged that steam risers, which pass through populated sections of the

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center, do not have any shut off valves. Therefore, if a pipe ruptures, the only means of shutting off the steam is through shutting down the entire system.

Velella also noted that there is no safety equipment to remove anyone who might be caught in the building once a pipe ruptured. This has occurred three times, but in each instance no one was in the affected area at the time of the rupture.

"The last time such a break occurred," according to the assemblyman, "heat was so intense that the roofing tar on the building melted."

Velella also noted that there are no fire alarms in or near the facility, and that the fire exit that leads to the roof is useless, because there is no means for anyone to get off the roof.

(The News will present a special report on the safety hazards at the center in next week's paper.)

After the governor received the letter, Thomas Coughlin, the state commissioner for the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, called Dr. Cohen to chastize him for discussing the facility's physical problems, which the state has maintained do not even exist, reliable sources told the News.

Coughlin, according to the sources, threatened to transfer Dr. Cohen to Letchworth Village, a mental health facility in Queens.

Coughlin first proposed the

transfer to Cohen, not as a threat, but as an opportunity to save what the commissioner described as a failing facility, which its present director "cannot handle," according to a source close to the situation.

In fact, the source said that the commissioner initially praised Dr. Cohen, telling the director that he is the only man in the department who is capable of upgrading Letchworth Village.

However, when Dr. Cohen refused to agree to the transfer, Coughlin told him he would be fired if he disobeyed the commissioner. Dr. Cohen still refused to consent to the transfer and promised to fight to keep his post.

Dr. Cohen would not confirm or deny the Coughlin ultimatum. However, the director asserted that he intends "to continue supplying the kind of services in the Bronx" that he has been supplying for the last 15 years.

Before Coughlin could take action on his threat to dismiss Dr. Cohen a member of the Kennedy family, believed to be Eunice Kennedy Shriver, called the

commissioner to urge against Dr. Cohen's removal. Dr. Cohen, a member of the President's Committee on Mental Retardation is a consultant to the Kennedy Foundation and has worked closely in the past with the Rose Kennedy Center for the retarded, housed on the grounds of Bronx Municipal Hospital Center.

Assemblyman Velella also intervened at this point to voice his objections to Dr. Cohen's removal.

Coughlin then agreed to reconsider removing the nationally respected director, and has set May 15 as the date he will make a final decision on the matter.

Velella said he has agreed to a request from Coughlin not to discuss the situation until the commissioner reaches a decision on Dr. Cohen's fate as director of Bronx Developmental. "But I will have a statement after May 15," Velella added.

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