

Island handicapped facility unsafe in case of fire — city

By ANEMONA HARTCOLLIS

A Mariners Harbor facility for the handicapped evidently is not equipped to safely evacuate its occupants in case of fire, according to a memo released yesterday by Philip Goldstein, borough superintendent for the city Building Department.

Goldstein's memo is based on the outcome of a surprise fire drill held Sept. 22 at the facility, which is operated by United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Associations of New York State, a non-profit agency under contract to the state.

The memo, written to Building Commissioner Irving Fruchtman, warns that the test evacuation was dangerously slow and advises reconsideration of a June 4 decision to allow severely handicapped people to occupy the building — a former indoor tennis facility.

Meanwhile, Goldstein said he has ordered UCP to restrict occupancy

of the building, at 2324 Forest Ave., the former Richmond Racquet Club, to daylight hours.

The building houses therapeutic programs for up to 200 mentally and neurologically impaired residents of the Nina Eaton Center, located on the grounds of the South Beach Psychiatric Center, and the Karl D. Warner Center, on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook. Buses take the handicapped people from the institutional living settings to the training center five days a week.

On Sept. 22, 26 UCP staff members were able to evacuate 55 handicapped people from the building in about nine minutes in response to a test alarm sounded without warning by the Fire Department, according to Warren Haring, deputy borough fire commander.

Haring said that he, Borough Commander Richard Sloan, Goldstein and other building and fire of-

ficials witnessed the dry run and deemed it chaotic and prolonged.

Haring said UCP had conducted one previous drill, on Aug. 13, when UCP officials reported 85 handicapped people evacuated by an unknown number of staff in four minutes. Neither fire nor building officials witnessed that drill, whose reported time Haring considered "very good."

UCP had been advised by the Fire Department after the first fire drill to expect an impromptu alarm in the future, Haring said.

Reached by telephone yesterday, UCP Executive Director Robert Schonhorn abruptly hung up when asked to comment on the fire drills.

Most of the individuals receiving therapy in the facility cannot walk and are confined to wheelchairs or rolling carts, complicating evacuation, according to Goldstein. They must be pushed along either of two corridors the length of tennis

courts. There are a pair of exits at only one end of the building. Each exit, wide enough to fit two chairs abreast, leads down a permanent ramp to the street.

Goldstein said that, after consulting with fire officials, he has concluded that the most effective way to assure fire safety would be to require the installation of a sprinkler system. Another possibility, he said, would be to open additional exits along the sides of the corridors. He said he plans to propose both remedies to Fruchtman.

Until prospective remedies can be reviewed, he said, he has — asked in his memo for an abbreviated renewal of the temporary Certificate of Occupancy granted June 4 by the Building Department to UCP. The certificate, due to expire Dec. 4, would routinely be renewed for 90 days. Goldstein said he has recommended a 30-day renewal.

"The fact is, they're in there," he said, "and I don't think we or the Fire Department want to create unnecessary hardship for these unfortunate handicapped persons. But quite frankly, the evacuation was a disaster. We're working toward maximizing safety."

Goldstein said he was more lenient in recommending a temporary Certificate of Occupancy last summer because, until watching the fire drill, he had not "realized how severely handicapped these people are."

Fire officials explained that, because the UCP facility is classified as a school, it is required under state law to stage 12 fire drills a year.