

Threatened strike will hurt handicapped

By STEVIE
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A threatened strike by drivers in the Amalgamated Transit Union tomorrow would leave at least 170 severely handicapped people housed in United Cerebral Palsy Association apartments and group homes on Staten Island with no transportation to their day programs.

Unless a last-minute agreement over salary increases is reached by midnight, the union representing drivers in AFL-CIO Locals 1181-1061 will strike against United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, the state's largest private provider of services to the disabled.

A spokeswoman for the UCPA said last night that there is "no hope a strike can be avoided at this point, and we are heartsick about the loss of services to our clients."

Union officials on the Island and in Manhattan could not be reached for comment, but on Wednesday, members rejected the last offer of a 7-percent salary increase, according to the UCPA. Talks that were scheduled for yesterday were unsuccessful, the UCPA said.

Representatives from both the union and UCPA last met before Rosemary LeBoeuf, a commissioner of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.

The UCPA provides transportation to 700 handicapped people throughout New York City, and a strike would most probably severely affect those living in apartments and group homes. Those particular clients rely more heavily on transportation to day programs and clinics.

Another carrier, the spokeswoman said, which is not involved in the strike action, will continue to provide transportation for other clients assigned to UCPA apartments and group homes.

But at least half of the 280 UCPA clients living at the Karl D. Warner Center on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook, she said, will have no transportation to the Community Training Center for their day programs.

In addition, those clients being housed at five apartments located on Clove Road, Victory Boulevard, and in a newly built group home on Medina Street, will also be affected.

There will be no transportation for UCPA clients to Warner Center's clinic. About 300 clients visit the Warner Center and other special clinics monthly, according to UCPA statistics.

"We believe the agency's offer of a 7 percent salary increase is both fair and generous, especially in light of UCP's severe financial difficulties," said Robert Schonhorn, the agency's executive director.

"Because of the state's failure to reimburse us properly for expenses incurred over the past year, we are in no position to offer more than this. In fact, considering the economic climate, 7 percent seems more than reasonable," he added.

The agency, which has been locked in an ongoing dispute with the state over Medicaid reimbursement, threatened to shut down in May. At the time, UCPA said the state was threatening its survival by demanding more money to use state-owned buildings at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

But the state maintained that the agency had not provided a promised financial report on its operations and was guilty of fiscal mismanagement. The UCPA had threatened to close the Warner Center and the 50-bed Nina Eaton Center at South Beach Psychiatric Center.

The agency had given notice last March of its intention to shut down June 30, but rescinded it in May after the state agreed to review its financial claims and the city's Board of Education assumed control of an education program the agency operated for Karl Warner residents.

The agency maintains 75 apartments throughout the city, as well as two day program centers.