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Neighborhood News

COMPILED BY LIZ GOFF

Temporary Reprieve For St. Mary's Senior Center

Senior activists and local legislators won a partial reprieve from the city last week, when officials at the Department for the Aging (DFTA) announced they will keep the St. Mary's Senior Center in Long Island City open for another six months.

The center, operated by Catholic Charities as a haven for local seniors for more than two decades, was slated to close on June 29. Under the extension approved by DFTA the center will remain open through December 2007, agency officials said.

"We are working with local elected officials, seniors and Catholic Charities to examine the need for the often-underutilized center," DFTA spokesperson Christopher Miller said.

Miller said DFTA and the center's management agency, Builders for Family & Youth, Inc. (a Catholic Charities affiliate), would review operations and "consider every option" to keeping the center open, including moving the operation to another location.

"We are happy and thankful that we can continue to provide services to seniors in a community where Catholic Charities maintains an historic presence," said a spokesperson for Builders for Family & Youth. "We hope a longer-term solution can be found so that the seniors in Long Island

City will continue to have a senior center in their neighborhood."

Catholic Charities announced in May that the center, located at 10-14 49th Ave., would be closing due to underutilization, an influx of young professionals to Long Island City and mounting costs of maintaining the center building.

City Councilmember Eric Gioia, whose district includes the St. Mary's Senior Center, said his office is "aggressively searching" for another site to house the center.

State Can Deny Driver's Licenses

New York state has the right to deny driver's licenses to immigrants who can't prove they are in the United States legally, the state's highest court ruled last week.

A lawsuit brought by immigrants and their advocates charged that a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) policy established under former Governor George Pataki's administration "is essentially an effort to deny driver's licenses to immigrants not legally present in New York", court records state.

In the high court's ruling, Judge Robert Smith wrote, "To state the obvious, undocumented aliens lack documents. And the DMV's right to insist on such documents is undisputed."

The lawsuit centered around a rule issued on Sept. 6, 2001 (five days before terrorists attacked the Twin Towers), requiring immigrants to provide federal immigration documents when applying for

driver's licenses to prove they were in the country legally.

The state has a longstanding rule requiring applicants without a Social Security number to submit a letter from the Social Security Administration stating the person was not eligible to work in the United States, but was in the country legally.

Advocates filed the lawsuit after New York state started to strictly enforce the new rule in 2004 in a crackdown that was expected to strip driver's licenses from more than 300,000 illegal immigrants.

Maternal Grandmother Wins Valery Custody

The story of Valery Lozada, the little girl dumped on a street in Middle Village two years ago by the man who murdered her mother, entered a new phase last week when a Queens judge awarded custody to her maternal grandmother.

Queens Family Court Judge Marybeth Richroath ordered Valery, now 6, to live with her grandmother, Roxanna Rivandeneira of Bolivia.

Valery has been living with relatives in a suburb of Chicago since her mother's boyfriend, Cesar Ascarrunz, murdered her mother in September 2004.

Ascarrunz disposed of the woman's body on a Jackson Heights street corner and drove Valery to a residential street in Middle Village in the middle of the night, put the little girl out of his car and drove away, court records state.

Ascarrunz was later convicted of the murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Shortly after the murder, Valery went to live with her birth father's sister, Iris Shavedra, and her family. Valery's natural father is currently serving jail time in Bolivia on drug charges.

A tearful Richroath told reporters she was "very happy and grateful" as she left the Queens courthouse after she was awarded custody of Valery.

Richroath said she plans to take custody of Valery next month, and will probably return home to Bolivia with the girl in August.

NYPD Radiation Detectors On A Roll

Queens cops will soon be bicycling through local neighborhoods wearing backpacks containing new, high-tech radiation detectors.

Police officials last week unveiled portable radiation detectors that can be carried in backpacks or on bicycles to help police patrol high terror targets such as ballparks and sports arenas.

Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said the backpacks will be used by trained officers patrolling prime venues such as Yankee Stadium and the United Nations.

Cops will wear earpieces connected to the detectors through which they will be alerted to any radiation in the areas they are patrolling, Kelly said.

Kelly said the NYPD has had great success testing roughly 1,000 smaller radiation detectors with limited range over the past year.

'Career Criminal' Bill OK'd

Criminals who commit four or more crimes within a 10-year period would face more time behind bars under a bill passed last week by the state senate.

The 'Career Criminal' bill, introduced by state Senator Frank Padavan after a heartless mugger attacked Queens seniors Rose Morat, 101 and Solange Elizee, 85, earlier this year must now go before the state Assembly.

Jack Rhodes, the man charged in the two attacks, has a lengthy criminal history dating back

to 1990, law enforcement officials said.

YMCA Offers Water Safety Tips

While preparing a family to take the plunge into a backyard pool or the deep blue sea, parents are reminded how important it is to teach children water safety tips that can prevent serious injury or drowning.

Water safety experts say the second leading cause of injury-related death for children ages 14 and under is drowning.

YMCA officials are hoping to slow down the tide of water-related incidents this summer by offering swimming instruction at local centers.

Officials are also offering the following safety tips for water-loving Queens residents:

- Always choose a public beach or pool that is clean and safe.
- Make sure the pool or beach has a qualified lifeguard on duty.
- Make sure the water is clean.
- Make sure the pool facility is clean and well maintained.
- Check to make sure there are no loose electrical wires or connections near the water.
- Make sure there are telephones or other means of communication on hand.
- Make sure there is a sufficient amount of emergency equipment on hand, and that staffers are trained in emergency procedures.

- Check to make sure there are markers on pools showing the different depths of water.
- Make sure there are lifelines installed in pools to separate shallow areas from deep water.

Experts said most drowning incidents involving children under age five occur in backyard pools. For that reason, parents are advised to take note of the following tips:

- Young children should always be supervised when playing near a pool or swimming.
- Check local requirements. Homeowners in many areas are required to install secure fencing with childproof locks around a pool to keep curious young children from falling into the water. Fencing is a good idea for all pools, even in areas where they are not required by law, experts said.
- Homeowners are urged to post a list of Pool Rules near backyard pools. Adults supervising youngsters should not allow running or horseplay around pool areas, experts said.
- Parents should check the quality of inflatable toys and tubes used by youngsters in the water. Some items may cost less, but may deflate while the child is in the water.
- Homeowners should be prepared for unexpected emergencies. Keep a long pole on hand at poolside, along with a ring buoy with throwing line and a first aid kit. Take classes in CPR, first aid and lifesaving techniques and don't be afraid to call 911 for help.
- Allow swimmers to dive only where the water is deepest in the pool, at least nine feet deep from the pool deck. Post signs reminding swimmers to check the water depth before diving.

Firefighters, emergency medical technicians and other emergency responders advise keeping a phone in the area of a backyard pool and using it to call 911, even if the emergency does not appear to be serious. Experts agree that it's better to take the side of caution to save a life.

YMCA branches throughout Queens offer programs and instruction in water safety, education and swimming lessons for adults, teens and young children.

For information on YMCA Summer Community Outreach Programs in your neighborhood, visit www.ymcany.org.