



Fourteen fire departments fought yesterday's apartment fire in Hewlett that left nearby residences and businesses uninhabitable.

GROUPS PUSH SUFFOLK ON SERVICES

BY RICK BRAND

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Social services advocates have filed a contempt motion in federal court and requested appointment of an outside special master to force Suffolk County to speed up handling of food stamp and Medicaid requests.

The Empire Justice Center and the National Service for Law and Economic Justice filed the motion last week in U.S. District Court in Central Islip. They claim that in 23 percent of cases, the Social Services Department failed to process food stamp applications within the required 30 days. Suffolk also missed the 45-day deadline for processing Medicaid applications in 29 percent of cases, said Linda Hassberg, an Empire Justice Center senior attorney.

"These laws are on the books to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable among us do not suffer because of bureaucratic delays," Hassberg said.

Suffolk Social Services Commissioner Gregory Blass called the claims "excessive and dramatically overstated." He said that in emergency cases, the needy get immediate attention. "People are not going without food or shelter," he said.

The motion is the latest development in a lawsuit dating to 2008. The plaintiffs claimed that Suffolk's response to aid applications was so slow that people "with urgent medical needs . . . lacked money to even buy food." In 2009, a judge ordered Suffolk to report to advocates on efforts to improve performance.

Laura Redman, a lawyer for National Service, said a special master with expertise in public benefits is needed because the county has not met many of the benchmarks set by the court.

Blass said the county is making a "good-faith effort" to comply with court mandates but needs time to fully comply with federal rules. "With this bad economy, many more turned to DSS for help," Blass said. "And as county revenue took a steeper dive, there [has been] too little to pay overtime, and it's harder to hire and keep enough staff to give that help."

Suffolk has until March 12 to respond to the motion.

After fire, 30 left homeless

BY KERY MURAKAMI

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More than 30 people were made homeless in a Valentine's Day blaze in Hewlett that damaged apartments and businesses, including a flower shop.

On one of the busiest days of the year for a florist, Dale Sealy sadly surveyed the scene yesterday afternoon.

"I'm devastated. Words can't express how I'm feeling," Sealy said as he stepped inside his store, Hewlett Florist, to check out the water damage.

Besides Sealy's shop, the two-story building at 1437 Broadway housed four apartments and three other businesses: the Hewlett Cafe; Cotton Nail Salon; and D'Angelo Italian Gourmet Deli.

Neither the apartments nor the stores will be habitable soon, officials said. There were no injuries, but 33 people were displaced, authorities said, and Red Cross spokesman Richard Schneider said his agency was helping to relocate them.

Nassau County Fire Marshal James Hickman said investigators have ruled the blaze acci-

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dental. Hewlett Fire Chief Ethan Lahey said the fire started in the kitchen of a rear apartment on the second floor, causing about \$500,000 in damage to the structure.

Yesterday, Angel Fourier stood outside with about a dozen other residents waiting to be relocated and taken away by bus. Fourier said he got a call from his wife about the fire. "I ran home. I've never been so scared. There's a lot of homeless people right now."

Thomas Merges, the cafe owner, said he was working in the restaurant when he smelled smoke. "I came outside and saw smoke coming from the roof. Just black smoke and flames," sometime between 11:30 a.m. and noon.

Fourteen fire departments responded to the 11:46 a.m. call. The blaze was declared under



Dale Sealy's florist shop was ruined, leaving him "devastated."

control by 12:30 p.m.

The florist said the fire broke out just as he was getting bouquets ready to be delivered, and preparing for the usual last-minute rush of boyfriends and husbands expected at the end of the day.

Sealy estimated he lost about \$7,000 of the usual \$10,000 he makes on Valentine's Day. Instead, he was calling customers, telling them there would be no flowers yesterday.

"I have good customers.

They'll understand," he said.

One young woman displaced by the fire held a box of chocolates and a card a friend gave her that said "Happy unValentine's Day," a joke related to her dislike of the lovers' holiday. "It's another reason to hate it," said the woman, who did not want to give her name as she stood outside looking at what the fire had wrought.

With Patricia Kitchen
and Olivia Winslow