

Cresson

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Sprinklers Cited In Retarded Fire Deaths

Faulty sprinklers and detection equipment have been blamed by a local group for the mentally retarded in the deaths of two residents in a fire at Cresson State School Hospital in Cambria County.

"Cresson is not even in compliance with their own fire and safety regulations," said Mrs. Barbara Sistik, a board member of the Allegheny County Chapter of the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC).

Mrs. Sistik, the mother of a

mentally retarded child, and Robert Nelkin, staff member of the local PARC group, visited the state school and hospital following the deaths Thursday of Carl Dodara, 21, of Harrisburg, and John Lytle, 30, of Clearfield County.

Two Residents Died

The two mentally retarded residents died of smoke inhalation in the fire, which was confined to a dormitory wing housing 150 patients.

Another resident, Alex Streppa, 21, son of Mr. and Mrs. Alex Streppa of 1011 Chartiers Ave., West End, is listed in critical condition in Altoona Hospital.

Following an inspection of the state school and hospital, Nelkin and Mrs. Sistik yesterday criticized state legislators for failing to pass House Bill 2637, which would have provided sprinklers and detection equipment at the facility.

"We must wonder if these two deaths could have been averted if Cresson had received the \$625,000 requested in the legislation and had installed this equipment," Mrs. Sistik said.

Lauds Staff Members

She said it is "fortunate that the entire wing didn't become an absolute inferno. It is frightening to think of what might have happened with less alert, dedicated, efficient staff members on duty."

Meanwhile, Dr. Norman W. Mulgrave, local PARC president said his group would launch an intensive effort to have fire and safety compliance records of Pennsylvania's nine state schools and hospitals and interim care facilities investigated.

"What if this happened at Polk or any of the huge, old, overcrowded, understaffed facilities? How could a handful of staff evacuate hundreds of non-ambulatory residents from buildings with wall-to-wall beds and insufficient fire escape routes?" he said.

Office Upset

Will H. Burrow, superintendent of Cresson, was unavailable for comment although his office said he was visibly upset about questions surrounding the deaths.

Fire and safety codes are established by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry.