

## Center's Lost in City Switch

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More than 20 years ago, Suleika Cabrera took a crumbling former East Harlem school building and transformed it into an oasis for the neighborhood's mostly-Hispanic retirees — the Leonard Covello Senior Center.

All those years, Cabrera never asked for thanks or special treatment from the politicians. She has quietly opened similar senior centers all over town since 1978. That was the year she founded her nonprofit Institute for Puerto Rican/Hispanic Elderly.

But this month, the Bloomberg administration suddenly canceled Cabrera's contract for the East Harlem center and ordered her staff to vacate by Oct. 1.

And next week, the Department for the Aging expects to turn over operation of Covello to an upper East Side agency well-connected to the city's elite — the Carter Burden Senior Center on E. 77th St.

Officials say Cabrera's group simply lost a new, "innovative" and streamlined competitive process for funding of senior centers.

"This is one of the sites that had some competition," Aging Commissioner Lillian Barrios-Paoli, told me, and "Carter Burden simply had a higher-rated proposal."

Barrios-Paoli conceded Cabrera's group runs excellent centers, and notes that it continues to receive city funding for seven centers.

"But just because you get a contract once, you don't deserve it for life," Barrios-Paoli said.

The Carter Burden center may have had a better proposal on paper.

But Cabrera insists the selection process was stacked against her group, and was fraught with procedural violations of the city's own contracting rules.

The city is trying to take away her "flagship program" without any recognition of all the years she put into it — including a new, state-of-the-art gymnasium she was about to inaugurate there, she claims.

Carter Burden has "no connection" to the largely low-income and Hispanic seniors she serves, Cabrera says. It is merely to gain control of a valuable city-owned building in a rapidly gentrifying part of East Harlem.

Late Tuesday, Cabrera filed a request for a temporary restraining order against the city in Manhattan Supreme Court.

William Dionne, Carter Burden's director, says his group does have ties to East Harlem, since "more than 50% of our center's case management load comes from that neighborhood."

This kind of dispute over contracts is hardly new in the Bloomberg era.

The mayor's aides routinely write new or special procurement policies while giving only lip service to existing regulations or public input, says attorney Claude Millman, who represents Cabrera and who was city contracting chief under Rudy Giuliani.

This week, for instance, the city held a legally-mandated public hearing on the contract for the Covello Center. But the hearing came weeks after officials informed Cabrera her contract had been canceled. Furthermore, her group received no notice of the hearing, so none of the Covello senior citizens affected by decision even had a chance to testify.

And while Carter Burden is set to take over Covello's operations next week, City Hall has yet send the contract to Controller John Liu for review and registration, as required by the City Charter.

The city "often gives vendors authorization to work and registers the contract afterward," Barrios-Paoli said. Translation: ignoring the charter has become routine for this administration when it comes to contracting.

"Unfortunately, they [Cabrera's group] lost this competition and they don't want to accept it," is how Barrios-Paoli sums it up.

But Cabrera is not about to stay quiet.

"They're not going to take a program we built for our seniors and put someone from outside community in charge," she said.

She'll see the city in court.

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