

Embezzlement trial draws attention of IRS

By Richard A. Kiley
Staff writer

ELMIRA — The trial of a former St. Joseph's Hospital executive currently facing two felony embezzlement charges is attracting the attention of the Internal Revenue Service.

Jeffrey Katz, of 908 Bowman Road, Elmira, was arrested June 2 on two felony charges of second-degree grand larceny for allegedly forging signatures on more than 1,500 checks worth a total of \$270,000. Katz, who is alleged to have embezzled the money from the hospital over a seven-year period, is free on \$20,000 bail.

In a telephone interview Aug. 22, Chemung County District Attorney James T. Hayden said he had contacted U.S. Attorney Dennis C. Vacco of Buffalo "to see if he wanted to initiate an investigation into any tax evasion."

District Attorney Hayden said Vacco notified the Internal Revenue Service of the embezzlement case, adding that the IRS and Vacco will wait for the case to be completed in Chemung County Court before beginning a formal investigation.

The bogus checks allegedly were issued to individuals and businesses in payment of non-existent services to St. Joseph's Hospi-

tal. Katz is suspected of forging the payees' signatures and depositing the funds into his personal account at the Elmira Savings Bank.

The district attorney said lawyers for both sides are currently filing motions with the court, and that the trial will not likely start until later this fall.

Katz's lawyer, Carl Hayden — who is no relation to the district attorney — earlier this month requested a pre-plea report on Katz. The report includes a description of a defendant's social, educational and employment background and any previous criminal record.

District Attorney Hayden would not say whether a possible plea bargain has been discussed with Katz's lawyer.

"All I can say is there has been substantial discussion with his attorney regarding all facts of the case ... including proposed dispositions," the district attorney said.

The Chemung County district attorney said he began his investigation into the case May 15 at the request of "high-level administrators" at the hospital.

If convicted, Katz could face a maximum of 22 years in jail.

John J. Renz, vice president for planning and marketing at St. Joseph's Hospital, said that it would be inappropriate for the hospital to comment on any developments of the case.

Katz arrived at St. Joseph's in 1976. He became administrative director of the Twin Tiers Rehabilitation Center at St. Joseph's in 1979, and held that position until his promotion to vice president in charge of rehabilitation, occupational health services, laboratory services and volunteers at the hospital. Among other responsibilities, Katz received and approved vouchers for payment of services provided to the departments under his jurisdiction.

Project seeks to break cycle of poverty

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

MOUNT MORRIS — If God helps those who help themselves, then Yvonne Switzer can depend on some divine assistance in the months ahead.

Switzer has spent the last four months folding clothes, taking phone calls and generally helping out at the Clothing Co-op Center, 10 Clinton St.

The 25-year-old woman said she took herself and her 4-year-old son out of an abusive relationship with her former live-in boyfriend four months ago, and exclaimed that working at the co-op has resurrected her buried sense of self.

"I love it here; it really helps my self-esteem," Switzer said.

Switzer is one of 10 low-income volunteers working on a regular basis at the co-op, a second-hand clothing store that provides donated items at minimal or no cost to customers. The co-op was opened in February, 1988, by the Livingston County Coalition of Churches, an inter-denominational organization of about 70 churches including several Catholic parishes.

The co-op is also the headquarters of Project Empower, initiated last fall by the coalition as an attempt to help impoverished people break out of the trap of a low-income existence. In June of this year Project Empower received a \$2,300 grant from the Campaign for Human Development, a funding program of the U.S. Catholic Conference.

Project Empower was just the kind of program the U.S. bishops envisioned when they created the CHD, according to Greg Haehl, coordinator of parish social ministry in Livingston County. "The neat thing about this is that it's the poor people themselves helping each other," Haehl observed, adding, "regular social services are a dime a dozen."

Project Empower is directed by an 11-member board, consisting of clergy and

low-income people, and operates through Gateway Family Services, which encompasses the co-op, a referral service and a lay-advocacy program. Adams estimated that 20-40 people use the Gateway services on a daily basis.

Gateway will put the CHD funds to use for general expenses in its 1989 budget of \$22,150, according to Holly Adams, coordinator of Project Empower. The budget covers Adams' salary and Gateway's rent, utilities and administrative expenses.

Each of Gateway's programs is designed to give the poor practical aid in navigating through the economic, legal and social straits of poverty. For example, co-op volunteers like Switzer are being taught such work skills as taking inventory, cashiering and budget planning.

Six lay advocates, including Switzer, help refer clients to other agencies such as the Department of Social Services, and three of the advocates, including Adams spent 50 hours last fall learning social-service law on such matters as food stamps, Medicaid and Medicare and landlord-tenant relationships.

Project Empower has also contracted with Legal Services of the Finger Lakes to provide assistance to victims of domestic violence, Adams said. Area women's shelters have referred several of their residents to Gateway Family Services for help in rebuilding their lives, she noted.

One of those women was Switzer, whom Gateway helped find a subsidized apartment after she left her boyfriend. "I wasn't aware of the services available to me," Switzer said, noting that she considered returning to her boyfriend after exhausting all other possibilities for housing herself and her son. "Gateway helped so that I didn't have to go back."

Switzer plans to pursue a bachelor's degree in social services. She has taken to heart the Project Empower philosophy of paying back the program by helping others

in similar situations. "I volunteer every day," she said.

Project Empower unifies the anti-poverty efforts of the Livingston County Coalition of Churches, remarked Mabel Treadwell, a member of the Project Empower Board and a pastoral-assistant intern at St. Thomas Aquinas/St. Lucy in Leicester.

"After we opened the clothing co-op, people would come in and talk about the difficulties they were experiencing," Treadwell said. She noted that the coalition considered opening a separate office for Project Empower, but opted to locate it in the co-op instead because it would attract more people. "It's much better if we draw people off the street into a service-type situation," she said.

Project Empower also embodies the CHD philosophy, Treadwell commented. "It's a hand-up instead of a hand-out," she said.

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