

# New York contractor charged with violating child labor laws

By CHASE WRIGHT

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NORWALK -- A New York contractor is facing felony charges for allegedly violating Connecticut's child labor laws in the construction of an assisted-living facility in Norwalk.

The president of Allstate Interiors, Frederic Soward, 52, was arrested Monday on a work enforcement warrant under Connecticut Department of Labor (DOL) regulations that cover the prohibitive and hazardous employment of minors.

Soward is accused of employing a 13-year-old boy to install drywall at an assisted-living and memory care senior community, known as Maplewood at Strawberry Hill. He posted \$25,000 bond and is due in court September 4.

Soward's attorney, Gregory J. Gallo, called the charges against his client "absolutely baseless."

Gary Pechie, director of the Wage and Workplace Standards Division, said the violations were first reported by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration on Aug. 14.

State inspectors visited the site to investigate and found a 13-year-old boy working on the project. The child, who is believed to be the nephew of one of Soward's workers, was allegedly wearing a hardhat and was covered in drywall tape and compound, Pechie said.

Soward, who was not on-site at the time, allegedly claimed to be unaware that a child was working on the project.

Pechie said Soward's excuse "doesn't cut it with us."

"This is one of our more serious incidents," he said. "As soon as we heard about the allegations, we dispatched two agents to that site. This is something we don't tolerate in the state of Connecticut -- minors being put in harm's way."

In a telephone interview, Gallo acknowledged that a minor may have been on the site at the time of the inspection, but said the young boy was not employed with Soward's company.

"There was never a minor working on the site," he said.

According to Pechie, the Connecticut Legislature recently voted to toughen the state's child labor laws.

The prohibitive employment of minors, now a felony, carries a penalty of \$5,000 or up to five years in

jail, he said.

Soward bills his company as "an American success story," built from humble beginnings into one of the Northeast region's largest framing, drywall and flooring subcontractors.

The company, based out of Monroe, N.Y., has appeared three times on ABC's hit reality television series "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

In May, members of the New England Regional Council Carpenters picketed outside Maplewood at Strawberry Hill, accusing Allstate of hiring non-union workers at sub-standard wages.

Ted Duarte, a senior organizer for the carpenters union, said the latest allegations are "direct reflection" on Allstate and the project's general contractor, Callahan Construction Management.

"They stoop to an all new low in the construction industry," he said. "This kid should be in seventh grade, not hanging drywall."

The \$17 million project will convert the former Fitch Elementary School into an 84-unit facility for seniors with Alzheimer's and other memory-related diseases. Occupancy is slated for September, roughly three months behind schedule.

Project Manager Dale Burr declined to comment on the allegations against Allstate.

Tom Gaston, executive vice president of development and acquisitions for Maplewood Senior Living, which is building the senior living community, said the company is cooperating with investigators.

"We will work with authorities to investigate these allegations in any way we can," Gaston said in a statement. "In the event the allegations are proven to be true, we will insist that our contractor terminate the subcontractor involved."