

Deal lets medically fragile Hammonton boy use home nurses in school

By MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, September 18, 2013 12:01 am

HAMMONTON — Victor Martinez, the medically fragile 4-year-old who needs constant nursing care, will start preschool today with his home health care nurses rather than a newly hired school nurse.

Supervisor of Special Services John Lavell said the district was able to reach a deal with Victor's nursing company, Preferred Home Health Care & Nursing Services, of Galloway Township, to decrease the cost of using Victor's regular nurses. The cost is now low enough that there is no financial benefit to the district hiring its own nurse, he said.

“Money is tight for the district,” Lavell said. “When the company keeps it cost-neutral, we don't have any other option (but to use the nurses the family prefers).”

State law requires school districts to use nurses chosen by the family of medically fragile students — those with life-threatening conditions that require constant management — if the cost is the same to the district.

“We met in the middle and it was enough, with all the savings on benefits and other factors, to be cost-neutral for the district,” Preferred Office Manager Craig Hoffer said. He said as a result of the compromise, the district won't have to pay a nurse for the many days Victor will miss school due to doctor's appointments, but will only pay for the time he is actually in school.

The district had previously said it could save about \$15,000 by hiring its own nurse, rather than pay the \$45 to \$50 per hour usually charged by Preferred.

Victor relies on both feeding and breathing tubes, and is deaf, because he was born with a rare condition called Nager syndrome, which affects development of the head, face, neck, arms and hands. It does not affect intelligence.

His parents, Nicolasa and Victorino Martinez, were afraid a new nurse might not know how to quickly repair a problem with the trach tube, which could cause brain damage or death if mishandled. They attended last Thursday's Board of Education meeting to ask, through an interpreter — they speak only Spanish — that the board reconsider its refusal to hire the nurses that have worked with Victor since he was a baby through the Medicaid program.

Hoffer has said Victor's condition will eventually improve, after more surgeries, and he will no longer require feeding and breathing

tubes. In two years or so, he should eventually be able to attend school without nursing care, Hoffer has said.

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