



NEWS

From the Office of the New York State Inspector General
Joseph Fisch

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Commissioner Used Guards To Chauffeur Shopping Sprees

An investigation by New York State Inspector General Joseph Fisch found that former state Health Commissioner Antonia Novello abused her position by having staff members act as personal chauffeurs to drive her, her family, and her friends to airports, shopping malls and other spots, while taxpayers paid the staff overtime costs of nearly \$50,000.

Novello, 64, a former Surgeon General of the United States (1990 – 1993), served as New York’s Health Commissioner from 1999 to 2006. While commissioner, she ordered three state employees based in Albany to work more than 2,540 overtime hours to take her on shopping sprees to Colonie Center and Crossgates Mall, water her house plants, buy her groceries and perform other personal tasks, according to a report released today by the Inspector General’s office.

The Inspector General forwarded his findings to the Albany County District Attorney for possible criminal prosecution.

Two security guards testified that they worked nights and weekends, remaining “on call” to ferry Novello to shopping sprees at local malls and Stuyvesant Plaza. They also checked her mail at her Albany apartment, picked up dry cleaning, moved furniture and stored her car at one guard’s home.

One guard complained that Novello would yell at him in public if he mishandled her packages.

Inspector General Joseph Fisch stated that Novello “shamelessly and blatantly exploited and abused her staff, adding new dimension to the definition of ‘arrogance’ and ‘chutzpah.’ Her misconduct was neither inadvertent nor

occasional, because she had been warned in a formal memorandum. Rather than cease her abuses, she undertook to disguise her actions in order to avoid detection. Her conduct was disgraceful and unconscionable.”

The investigation uncovered improper behavior, including:

1. Security guards repeatedly transported Novello’s mother to the Newark, N.J., airport to catch flights to Puerto Rico.
2. A Health Department investigator in New York City was used as a driver, taking Novello to Macy’s and Saks Fifth Avenue.
3. An Albany guard was ordered to work Christmas Day in 2006 to drive Novello to Newark, then pressured to charge vacation time and use his own car to retrieve her even though her term as commissioner had ended.

In 2003, Novello was cautioned by an executive staff member who was actually subordinate to her in a formal written memorandum to “never under any circumstances request or direct that an employee perform a personal (non-state) service for you,” the report found. But, the investigation revealed, she continued the practice and attempted to disguise her behavior.

Novello earned \$196,000 as commissioner, including a \$60,000 stipend as board president for the Health Research Institute. During her tenure, she was assigned a state car.

The Inspector General also concluded that Novello grossly underestimated her tax benefits in annual state and federal filings for her personal use of the auto and state drivers.

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