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Florida Hospital executive abused her power in N.Y. job, report says

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One of Orlando's top health-care executives is facing allegations she used public employees as personal valets when she headed the New York State Department of Health.

A report released Tuesday by the New York State Inspector General accuses Antonia C. Novello of ordering her staffers to do her shopping, water her plants, and drive her friends and family around New York on the state taxpayers' dime.

Florida Hospital hired Novello, a former U.S. surgeon general, last year as the vice president of Women's and Children's Health & Policy Affairs for Disney's Children's Hospital at Florida Hospital.

She was the commissioner of the New York State Department of Health from 1999 to 2006.

Novello, 64, faces possible felony charges for defrauding the government after allegedly underestimating the financial benefits she received from her state-provided automobile and driver on New York and federal income-tax filings.

The criminal allegations were forwarded to the Albany County district attorney.

Calls to Novello's attorney in Albany, N.Y., and her office at Florida Hospital were not returned to the Orlando Sentinel.

No red flags at hiring

Hospital officials would not comment on the investigation but wrote in an e-mail to the Orlando Sentinel that "our review of her performance and track record revealed tremendous support for her work and no suggestion or hint of these allegations."

Local leaders and others in Central Florida's medical circles were shocked at the news of Novello's alleged diva attitude and abuses of power.

Some fear the accusations could tarnish her accomplishments in the medical field, as well as strides she has made for women and Hispanics in the United States.

President George H.W. Bush appointed Novello to the post of U.S. surgeon general in 1990 -- a first for a



woman and Hispanic in U.S. history.

Registered nurse Jannia Mandez first heard Novello speak in 2006 at the Hispanic Summit sponsored by the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce. She remembers Novello as an admirable leader who promoted equality in health services.

"She's done so much for our history, contributions to pediatrics in the U.S., and devotion to children's and women's health," Mandez said. "She's done so much good that could be marred by these accusations. It's truly sad if that happens."

Orange County Commissioner Mildred Fernandez said she and Novello share a common background: Both were born in Puerto Rico and have risen through the ranks.

Fernandez considers herself a friend of Novello's and says that Latinas in high-profile positions are under intense scrutiny.

"We are public figures who are constantly being watched by everyone, so we must tread lightly," Fernandez said. "The costs for the coffee I serve in my office and the chocolates I give away all come out of my own pocket. I want everything to be perfectly transparent."

As commissioner of the New York Department of Health, she often was praised by Democrats and Republicans in that state for her commitment to health services.

Probe began in 2001

However, officials at the Inspector General's Office said Novello's poor treatment of employees and love for shopping during working hours was not a secret.

Employees left her coupons and sales fliers to encourage her to leave the office so they wouldn't have to stay late, investigators said.

The probe was launched after the wife of a former health employee complained to the Inspector General's Office in 2007. But complaints had been pouring in since 2001.

The investigation revealed Novello once ordered a security guard to carry a heavy statue of Buddha into her apartment and move it a few days later because she didn't like where he placed it.

The report said she also berated state guards in public for improperly carrying her shopping bags.

Novello brushed off warnings and continued using state employees and resources for personal tasks, the report shows.

According to the report, her actions cost the New York State Department of Health close to \$50,000 for 2,500 hours in overtime wages.

Novello "shamelessly and blatantly exploited and abused her staff, adding new dimension to the definition of 'arrogance' and 'chutzpah,'" Inspector General Joseph Fisch said in the report.

"Her conduct was disgraceful and unconscionable."

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