

Mental health chief rapped by Russo

By ELAINE HESS

Assemblyman Lucio F. Russo yesterday accused State Department of Mental State Hygiene Commissioner Alan D. Miller of a "calculated plan" to distort facts about the proposed budget cut in his department "to accomplish the selfish purpose of having no cuts at all.

"Every department has to learn that there are going to be cuts generally," he stated.

The Republican legislator, telephoning the Advance from Albany, accused the commissioner of "deliberately misleading the people" and alarming them "unnecessarily."

He said he resents the tactics and language used by Dr. Miller as giving the wrong impression of the facts while playing upon the emotions of the families of patients under the programs. "We are not permitting people to die," he remarked.

SUPPORTED BY DURYEA

Russo said that he was supported by Perry Duryea, Assembly speaker, and Willis H. Stephens, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. It is the Ways and Means Committee which is proposing a \$65 million budget cut next

year for the Department of Mental Hygiene.

"No one is trying to cut vital areas of public health," Russo said. However, he emphasized that the legislature is trying to "trim the waste and fat out of the budget" and reduce the amount of "duplications" in services, of which he reported "there is a lot of that."

The cut has been denounced by Commissioner Miller as having a disastrous effect on institutions for the mentally ill and retarded. In recent days Dr. Alvin M. Mesnikoff, director of South Beach Psychiatric Complex and Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook State School, have spoken out against the cut. They say it will hamper, if not halt, certain operations now and in the future.

Russo said he has been assured by the assembly speaker and the chairman of the Assembly Ways and Means Committee on two items affecting Staten Island:

- There will be "sufficient funds" allocated "to staff adequately" the new South Beach Psychiatric Center now going up in the Ocean Breeze Section and that construction will be completed by January.

- The Willowbrook State

School of practical nurse classes will not close by April 1 and students will be able to continue and complete their courses.

Dr. Mesnikoff last week contended that the cut will prohibit the filling of new positions for physicians to staff the center and prevent the center from opening. Russo retorted that "we (referring to the Legislature) are not so foolish as to build a facility without staffing. Cutting a staff is one thing but having no staff at all is quite something else," he said.

He said he used the word "adequate" in describing the staffing "because some of these department heads don't know what the word means."

SCHOOL CONTINUES

Dr. Jack Hammond a week ago announced that the cut would mean the closing of the Willowbrook School of Practical Nursing, now in its 10th year of operation and working with maximum enrollment. According to Russo, Willowbrook classes in practical nursing were told that the school would close down by April 1, the start of the fiscal year. "This is a deliberate lie," contended Russo.

As a result, he said, many concerned students and faculty members visited him in Albany. He said he reassured them that they will be able to finish their courses. "No such cut is contemplated," he said.

Russo said that Commissioner Miller was reprimanded last week and several times yesterday on the Assembly floor by various legislators, for giving the impression that the Legislature "is killing people."

"Cuts are being made for every department," he said, "because people are sick and tired of more taxes. We finally convinced the governor to come along with our position."

He said the governor last week "couldn't make" any cuts. Yesterday he said the governor said we must make them or otherwise businesses will leave the state of New York. "If that happens there will be more unemployment and less income for the state," Russo concluded.