

Union Says That Cutbacks Hurt Care for Mental Patients

By JOHN SIBLEY

A job freeze and other fiscal cutbacks at state institutions for the mentally ill and retarded have caused critical deterioration in patient care, the Civil Service Employees Association charged yesterday.

Theodore C. Wenzl, president of the union, told a news conference in the Warwick Hotel here that two elderly patients at Creedmoor State Hospital in Queens choked to death recently when they tried to feed themselves.

He said both patients should have been spoon-fed by ward attendants, but were not because of staff shortages.

In Albany, Assistant Commissioner Harold Wolfe of the Department of Mental Hygiene said yesterday that he had no knowledge of these cases. Mr. Wolfe added that if Mr. Wenzl had evidence to support his charge, he should forward it to the department.

The director of Creedmoor, Dr. Irvin M. Greenberg, said later that one of these patients had died of a heart attack. "The other patient," Dr. Greenberg said, "might have aspirated some food, but that could have happened under any circumstances."

During the state's budget crisis last spring, 2,839 employees of the Mental Hygiene Department were laid off.

Union members who work in several mental hospitals in the metropolitan area cited specific instances to support Mr. Wenzl's contention that "conditions are bordering on the scandalous."

The C.S.E.A. claims to represent 44,000 of the 54,000 workers currently employed in the state mental institutions. Employees of several of the institutions said at yesterday's news conference that patients regularly miss meals for lack of attendants to feed them.

Ronnie Smith, a psychiatric attendant of the Willowbrook State School for the mentally retarded on Staten Island, said he and one other attendant had to care for 60 spastic children and frequently could not get around to feeding all of them every meal.

Robert Guild, a C.S.E.A. staff member, declared:

"We've got patients wallowing in their own feces. We've regressed to where we were 20 years ago. There's no more rehabilitation. We're back to custodial care. Something's going to burst."

Amos Royals, who works as a transfer agent at Manhattan State Hospital on Wards Island, told of a recent attempted rape in a ward that housed both men and women patients. He said the two attendants on duty among 60

patients had to summon help from another ward.

William Cunningham, a kitchen worker at Brooklyn State Hospital, said dishes were being washed by patients untrained in sanitary procedures.

In reply, Commissioner Wolfe said:

"If these conditions are real, they are intolerable. The soon-

er we get detailed information, the sooner we can do something about them."

Mr. Wolfe added: "On a number of occasions when conditions have gone below a level we consider tolerable, we have been able to obtain relief from the State Bureau of the Budget."

The job freeze has been lifted, he said, to allow the department to hire a total of more than 200 employees at the Letchworth Village and Wassaic State Schools and at Rochester State and Suffolk Psychiatric Hospitals.

In addition, Mr. Wolfe said, a \$4.1-million grant under the Federal Emergency Employment Act has allowed the department to hire 253 employees since last month. Many of whom had been laid off earlier.