

SUNDAY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER ©

New York, N.Y. 10017, Sunday, December 19, 1971

MANHATTAN-BRONX
SECTION TWO

QUEENS
SECTION TWO

Stein to Lead Task Force To Willowbrook in a Study of 'Periled' Kids

By FRANK MCKEOWN

Manhattan Assemblyman Andrew Stein will take a Democratic Task Force on Health to the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island tomorrow to study charges that state wide economies have endangered the lives of the brain-damaged children at the school.

Accompanying Stein will be Assemblymen Stanley Fink and Brian Sharoff of Brooklyn and Assemblyman Sol Weprin of Queens.

James Kee of Stein's office said the group would study the charges and look for alternatives to the method of attrition used by the state to reduce the state payroll.

Murray Schnets of 18-15 215th St., a member of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, Willowbrook Chapter, said he had met with Dr. Jack Hammond, director of the school, to discuss what could be done to alleviate the problems.

He has charged that bureaucratic indifference, resulting from the statewide job freeze, has led to "critical" conditions at the school that placed the retarded children there "in immediate danger of death."

Schnets, an attorney whose daughter is in the institution, said the job freeze instituted last year has led to the Staten Island facility becoming so undermanned that it can't adequately care for the brain-damaged youngsters in the school. Schnets' wife, Vicki, is president of the Women's Organization for Retarded Children.

"The school has an authorized number of employes which it needs to give treatment," Schnets said, "but it is about 20 below this minimal staff."

The attorney said the school was supposed to have 3,628 employes but was operating with only 2,716.

"Before the job freeze went into effect at the end of last year," Schnets pointed out, "the school was already short, operating with only 3,348—279 persons below the minimum set by the state. But in the past year it has lost another 633 members because of the freeze."

Schnets said that many of the children at the school like his daughter, slow eaters whom it takes about 40 minutes to feed. "But because of the lack of staff, the school attendants can only allot five to six minutes to each child," the attorney said.

Lee Landes, president of the Board of Visitors, agreed that there was "a very definite danger, a threat to the children's lives, very definitely."

Landes said that even before the staff was so thin, "kids have died" at the Island facility. He said that, because there are not enough attendants to feed the youngsters slowly

as they require, the attendants have hurried them.

"The kids have gulped down food and choked on it," Landes declared, adding that the Board of Visitors has tried in vain to get more personnel at Willowbrook.

"We have traveled to Albany to try to get help and have found that every other state hospital is in the same way," Landes said. "There are only X number of dollars in the budget and it's a matter of priorities. Do you help schools or hospitals first?" he asked.

"It's simply a matter of which barefoot kid gets the shoes," he said.

Mrs. Madeleine Bodner, vice president of the Women's Organization for Retarded Children and a neighbor of the Schnets, said her group had carried out a letter writing campaign to try to get the state to add personnel at Willowbrook, but without success.

Drastic Steps Needed

She said her organization, composed of residents of the five boroughs, is seeking to expand to nearby communities in an effort to bring more pressure to bear on the Department of Mental Hygiene officials.

Schnets charged that the inability of the school attendants to take time to adequately feed the children was leading to sickness and will lead to death, unless drastic steps are taken.

"Deaths are occurring and the state is doing nothing," the attorney charged. "They should call in the National Guard."

He contended that people are very concerned over the situation in East Pakistan but are unaware that "kids are dying right now on Staten Island."

"If a town of 5,200 was caught in a flood, we would not hesitate to call in the disaster units,"

Schnets said. "There are about that many in Willowbrook in danger but nothing is being done."