

Union leader pins blame on Albany

By WILLIAM HUGS

Employees at Willowbrook State School, through union representatives, joined the chorus of those protesting conditions at the facility yesterday but were quick to blame Albany and the administration for the deterioration.

Thomas P. Delaney, head of the school's chapter of the Civil Service Employees Association which represents some 80 per cent of the workers, criticized those who are ready to blame attendants by saying: "Every one here is doing a good job under the circumstances."

Delaney, in an exclusive interview with the Advance, said many employees "feel they have not gotten a fair shake from the TV media."

"We would like the good work of the attendants shown as well as the bad conditions," Delaney said. "In spite of the budget cuts, the employees are trying to do a good job; but one person can't do the work of three. They're trying to do the impossible."

SHOWS BURDEN

The union chief gave statistics showing the burden that has been placed on the remaining workers, but he also cited some alarming information when asked if the employees would join the efforts of parents to improve conditions.

"We agree with those parents who have shown concern and are working for improvement," he said, "but unfortunately they're in the minority."

The sad fact is that maybe 10 per cent, at the most, of the parents bother to visit their children here. Some patients haven't had a visitor in three years or more.

Kind words for the employees were forthcoming from Mrs. Vicki Schneps, president of the Women's Organization for Retarded Children. During an inspection of one of the wards she said, "The people who work with these children are made of steel. They must be angels."

Mrs. Schneps has a child who has been a patient at Willowbrook for two years, but she is the only member of the group that is a parent of a patient. She also is a resident of Queens.

"This is not a local issue," she commented, explaining the role of her group. "We feel all legislators, from all parts of the city, are to blame because the parents of these patients come from all over the city. The issue certainly goes beyond Staten Island."

The issue, according to Delaney, is a direct result of Gov. Rockefeller's budget cuts. He noted that the picture at Willowbrook was "rosy" when Rockefeller was reelected in November 1970, and that the governor noted this in his campaign — and then ordered budget cuts for the mental health program a month later.

"The shortage of help that has resulted is the reason for the present situation," he explained. "Less than 75 per cent of our budget items are filled right now."

The result is that the patients, 70 per cent of whom are "profoundly" or "severely" retarded, are getting service like this, according to Delaney:

- "There are 100 employees in the laundry complex and they must clean 32,500 pounds of laundry each day.

- "The food service is a tragedy. Of the 225 people we're supposed to have feeding the patients, only 150 positions are filled.

- "There are only 115 budget items included for teaching the patients — and all the items are not people.

- "There are only 90 budget items for occupational therapy, 50 items for recreation and 35 items for physical therapy."

Delaney said the employees discussed starting a "job action" to protest the burden that these statistics point to. "But they decided against it because they knew it would harm the children," he said.

There are other problems, too, according to Mrs. Adele West, a union representative from Albany who is assigned to follow the situation at Willowbrook.

"The budget problem is not Hammond's (Dr. Jack Hammond, director of the school), but we feel the administration here could do a better job of protecting the employees," Mrs. West said.

She said there are constant "upheavals," with personnel being "shifted around for no apparent reason." She also claimed security is poor and reports of employees being attacked on the grounds are not uncommon.

"They have 11 security men to work three shifts. The administration could do more to improve that condition," she said, adding that workers have actually been harassed in buildings by outsiders, one of whom allegedly threw glasses around a kitchen recently.

Mrs. West was asked why workers put up with such conditions. She in turn asked a woman, who lives in Brooklyn and gets up each day at 4 a.m. to be at the school at 7 a.m., why she continues. The answer was, "Because I love the children."

Both union spokesmen said the workers are willing to work with "concerned" parents to improve the conditions, but until now have felt ignored and have been "concerned about the leadership shown by the parent groups."

"They work for improvement any way they can without deserting the patients," Delaney promised.