

State gives Willowbrook top rehiring priority

The state commissioner of mental hygiene said yesterday he would use an announced \$5 million budget restoration to rehire nurses and ward attendants for state institutions as the public outcry about the state's care of the mentally ill mounted.

Gov. Rockefeller announced Thursday that \$5 million would be restored to the state Mental Hygiene Department's budget for the year ending June 30. Following the announcement, Dr. Alan Miller, mental hygiene commissioner, said he would rehire hundreds of workers fired last spring because of the budget squeeze.

Miller said Willowbrook School, the target of most of the criticism, would get 300 additional personnel to ease overcrowded conditions in the wards. Critics say many of the seriously retarded patients were not being clothed, cleaned or fed.

High priority also would go to rehiring 200 ward aides for Letchworth Village in Rockland County and to upstate schools and mental hospitals, he said.

In Newburgh, N.Y., meanwhile, the mental hygiene coordinator for the State Civil Service Employees Association charged that Rockefeller's austerity budget was transforming state mental institutions into "snake pits."

Speaking before staff members of several mid-Hudson Valley institutions, Robert Guild also struck at the state's multi-million-dollar Albany mall project, saying: "I can't see covering the landscape with

concrete while neglecting this important part of taking care of unfortunate humans."

Dr. Theodore C. Wenzl, CSEA president, said budget cuts were reducing hospital staffs at the rate of 200 workers a week and called for formation of a coalition of hospital employes to fight the reductions.

Elsewhere, criticism — directed primarily at conditions at Willowbrook — mounted.

The New York State Association for Retarded Children called for formation of a separate state administrative body to deal with the problems of the mentally retarded in both institutions and communities.

"Conditions such as those being publicized at Willowbrook have existed for almost 20 years under three governors and various commissioners," Joseph T. Weingold, the association's executive director, said in a letter to Assemblyman Andrew Stein, Manhattan Democrat.

Stein is chairman of the Task Force created by Assembly Minority Leader Stanley Steingut to investigate state schools for the mentally retarded. Weingold compared the \$20,000 - a - year per patient spent in the Bronx State Hospital and the \$80,000 - per year per patient spent in the Bronx Psychiatric Children's Unit, with less than \$6,000 spent per patient at Willowbrook and less than \$5,000 at Letchworth Village.

He also urged the phasing out of large institutions and that small "group homes" be built to replace them. The homes would be cheaper to build, easier to operate and would provide better services, Weingold said.

The announcement by Rockefeller that he would propose a \$600 - million budget for the Mental Hygiene Department in the next fiscal year so far has done little to stem the wave of criticism about institutional conditions.

The budget would add \$20 million above the stay-even fiscal package he has ordered for most state departments. It would mean that state institutions for the retarded and mentally ill could keep the personnel being rehired now.

"It would not mean that all our problems have been solved by any means," Miller said. "I hope it means the corner has been turned."