

Key witnesses shun hearings on child abuse

By JUDITH HOLMES

The Richmond County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which has been holding public hearings into charges of widespread child abuse, neglect and mistreatment at Willowbrook State School, disclosed yesterday that key witnesses have refused to appear before the panel and present their evidence.

In a statement issued at the fourth hearing in Borough Hall, during which none of the scheduled witnesses appeared, Councilman Frank J. Biondolillo charged that "Dr. Michael

Wilkins, Dr. William Bronston, Mrs. Elizabeth Lee and Anthony Pinto and certain parent organizations are guilty of blatant, naked and arrogant irresponsibility to the community and the children at Willowbrook."

Ira J. Raab, attorney for the SPCC, said: "The panel is considering bringing appropriate legal action in the state courts to compel these uncooperative witnesses to appear and give sworn testimony to support their public accusations."

Dr. Wilkins and Mrs. Lee, who were ousted Jan. 5 because

of their differences with Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook, were scheduled to appear. Anthony Pinto, president of the Benevolent Society's Willowbrook Chapter, made a brief appearance at a Manhattan hearing Feb. 1 and was scheduled to appear at the Island hearing yesterday. Also expected was Dr. Bronston and several parents.

"They have gotten their pound of flesh from all the news media," said Councilman Biondolillo, "and now refuse to substantiate their public accusations by sworn testimony before a legally constituted

panel of independent examiners sponsored by the SPCC.

"The fact-finding panel and the SPCC have given their valuable time in an effort to allow an opportunity to all interested parties to present facts. These groups have given vent to their emotions and have startled the nation with their accusations, and now when we get down to the burlap, they are strangely silent and uncooperative.

"Such groups apparently are using these unfortunate children as pawns in a political power play. The SPCC, which has responded to a public outcry for

a full investigation into conditions at Willowbrook, is now being thwarted in its efforts to perform this public responsibility."

The final hearing was to be held in Borough Hall today beginning at 2 p.m. but lack of response has made more hearings necessary. The Rev. John Servodidio, a panel member and district director of Catholic Charities, urged "all parents, employes and others with important information to come before the panel in a spirit of cooperation and concern for all children."

Anthony Gaeta, a panel member and an administrative assistant to Congressman John M. Murphy, said "Those who

Manhattan Congresswoman Bella S. Abzug, today called for a congressional investigation into what she termed "unspeakably disgraceful conditions at Willowbrook and other New York State institutions for the mentally retarded."

In a letter to Wilbur Mills, chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means, Mrs. Abzug said conditions at the state institutions amounted to "a scandal of national proportions."

would share the compassion and concern of the SPCC for the rights of all children have moral responsibility to aid the investigation."

Another panel member present at yesterday's hearing, Manhattan Councilman Robert I. Postel, said: "We have enough evidence piling up at these hearings to warrant a grand jury investigation. The hearings must go on."

William Katz, director of the SPCC, asked that all interested witnesses contact him at Borough Hall.