

Fired aides rap hearings

"We were fired because we told the truth about the intolerable conditions at Willowbrook State School," said Dr. Michael Wilkens and Mrs. Elizabeth Lee today in a joint statement answering charges by Councilman Frank J. Biondolillo.

Both are scheduled to testify about conditions at Willowbrook before a joint legislative committee hearing on mental and physical handicaps later this month in Albany.

"Since the purpose of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children investigation is to compile essentially what has been disclosed by the media into a formal format to be presented to the legislative bodies which will be able to effect change, we see no reason to duplicate our testimony."

Biondolillo charged Thursday that Dr. Wilkens, Mrs. Lee and Anthony Pinto, president of the Benevolent Society's Willowbrook Chapter, "are guilty of blatant, naked and arrogant irresponsibility to the community and to the children at Willowbrook."

"I do not completely object to an investigation such as the SPCC's which seems to absolve the administrator of guilt," Mrs. Lee said separately in another statement. "However, this investigation appears to have placed blame on an individual employe, and it thereby misses the point."

"The massive child neglect at Willowbrook is the result of overcrowding and understaffing, and is not the fault of any one employe," she added.

"Perhaps Councilman Biondolillo and the other members of this hastily organized investigation team are sincerely interested in helping the retarded," Mrs. Lee said. "If so, they will stop devoting their energies to casting stones at individuals and begin working with those of us who are presenting constructive alternatives to the institutional system of care."

In addition to the joint statement, Dr. Wilkens, also issued a separate statement, in which he explained that "Staten Island politicians have little justification in speaking out now on Willowbrook."

"They have not fought the budget cuts. They have failed to inform themselves about conditions in Willowbrook until now, and now they are jumping in, holding hearings at which the finger of blame has been pointed at employes."

"They are deflecting attention to side issues, because they still seek to avoid the central issue—their irresponsibility and that of other politicians who have allowed these conditions to exist without bringing them to the public's attention," Dr. Wilkens said.

Pinto also released a statement saying that "the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, Willowbrook Chapter, after consulting with representatives for the SPCC and with persons who attended its hearings, believes that the thrust of the SPCC inquiry is to find fault rather than to seek solutions."

"In the highly charged atmosphere prevailing at Willowbrook, we believe that an inquiry which focuses criticism on a dedicated service staff is not desirable," Pinto said.

Moreover, we believe that the SPCC is not truly a representative organization, inasmuch as no parents of handicapped children participate.