

## Albany eyes problems at Willowbrook

By MICHAEL AZZARA

In advance of legislative hearings prompted by revelations of conditions at Willowbrook State School, Assemblyman Edward J. Amann reported that he had conferred last week with Assembly leaders on possible solutions to the problems besetting the Mental Hygiene Department.

The basic problem, said Amann, is money and he said he has been urging the legislative leaders to resist pressure to hold down the Mental Hygiene Department's budget.

The pressure, he added, comes largely from upstate lawmakers who prefer to see the state budget reduced, even at the cost of services, rather than impose additional taxes.

Meanwhile, an aide to State Sen. John J. Marchi said Marchi during the past week had been "in touch with Washington" in an attempt to learn what assistance may be available from the federal government.

He said the Island legislator plans to pursue this approach while also working on the state level to secure a reasonable budget for the department.

Hearings by the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation and the Physically Handicapped are scheduled for Wednesday in Albany.

At a meeting with Assembly Speaker Perry Duryea and Assembly Majority Leader John Kingston, Amann, a member of the joint legislative committee, said he stressed that the number of attendants at Willowbrook had been permitted to dip too low.

He suggested that steps be taken to assure that a "job freeze," ordered by Gov. Rockefeller as a means of averting a budget crisis, "must never again be applied to the Mental Hygiene Department."

The discussion also included, he said, an exploration of possible steps that may be taken immediately to improve conditions of overcrowding and understaffing at the Island institution.

"What do we do now," asked Amann. "Send some of the patients home? Take a hard line and stop accepting new patients?"

He conceded that at best the budget for the next fiscal year will not provide anything resembling a full solution. "I just hope more money will be allocated."

Increasing the pay of attendants in state institutions was also discussed, he added, as a means of reducing the high turnover rate among this group.

### RUSSO TAKES CREDIT

Assemblyman Lucio F. Russo, who said the three Island legislators have been "working behind the scenes," claimed credit for blocking the rehiring at Willowbrook of two employees suspended by Dr. Jack Hammond, the institution's director.

Russo said that Mental Hygiene Commissioner Alan Miller was about to reassign Dr. Michael Wilkins and Mrs. Elizabeth Lee, a social worker, to Willowbrook. The lawmaker said this would have been demoralizing to other employees who supported Hammond's move. He insisted, he said, that the director's action be allowed to stand.

The two were discharged for cooperating with the press in bringing conditions at the school to light.

Russo said that he too has been insisting that more funds be allocated to the mental hygiene budget.