

Court bid blasts Willowbrook

By **RAYMOND A. WITTEK**

An associate of Bronx Congressman Mario Biaggi yesterday called for a public court hearing into "mid-19th century" conditions at Willowbrook State School and charged the following practices exist:

- Patients being held in "solitary confinement" for periods up to five years.
- A "continual pattern of beatings and harassment" of residents.
- An estimated 75 per cent of professional staff members who are practicing illegally without licenses.
- The subjecting of patients to a hepatitis experiment without the approval of their parents or guardians.
- The administering of tranquilizers to offset staff shortages.

Bernard G. Ehrlich, a member of Biaggi's law firm, made the requests at a proceeding in Supreme Court in which the Bronx parents of a 21-year-old woman resident at the school are seeking court safeguards to guarantee her safety and insure that she receive adequate medical care and treatment, among other matters.

The resident, Adrienne, beaten twice earlier this year, but an assistant state attorney general denied this. She asserted that the woman, a profoundly retarded epileptic with an intelligent quotient of about 20 and a propensity for violence, had injured herself in falls.

Biaggi had instituted the proceeding in the Bronx last March on behalf of the resident and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Renelli. The case was transferred to Staten Island because of jurisdictional questions.

In yesterday's action, Ehrlich also called for the appointment of a "monitor" who would serve as a watchdog for the courts at the state school.

In arguing for a public hearing, Ehrlich said he was prepared to produce 20 witnesses, including staff members at the institution, who would testify about unsafe conditions.

Ehrlich said witnesses will also tell of overcrowding, lack of in-training programs for the non-professional staff, patients left unattended, prohibitions on mail, inadequate clothing and of a "pattern of involuntary servitude" whereby residents through the manipulation of records are purposely detained at the school, rather than released, to carry out "menial duties" that should be performed by staff members.

Assistant Attorney General Judith A. Gordon made an almost point-by-point denial of the allegations.

In addition to her comments on the alleged beatings earlier this year, she observed that Miss Renelli was a patient at Willowbrook "by the choice of her parents" and that they could obtain their daughter's release any time they sought it.

The assistant attorney general termed a "complete fallacy" the petitioners' claim that the patient was not receiving proper care and treatment and cited an affidavit from the school director, Dr. Jack Hammond, in which he said Miss Renelli was in "good physical condition."

In regard to the use of tranquilizers, she said this was sometimes needed in view of the patient's "intermittent episodes of violence."

conditions

In regard to the experiments in connection with hepatitis, she said the doctor who conducted the experiments was recently cited for his work by the medical profession. In any event, she said, parental consent is required before a resident may become part of the program.

The assistant attorney general said she was "not aware" of any prohibitions on residents' mail, and in regard to a demand by the petitioners that Willowbrook cease to take in new admissions to ease overcrowding, she said that there have been no new admissions for more than a month.

She also said, again in regard to one of Ehrlich's principal demands, that Miss Renelli has been removed from a building where she had been residing and is being kept in the school's surgical-medical building where she is under greater supervision.

Ehrlich described the patient as a "prisoner at Willowbrook." Both sides agreed that little can be done to improve her condition.

To bolster the petitioners' claim that Miss Renelli and other residents failed to receive proper supervision, Ehrlich submitted an affidavit from Dr. Manny Sternlicht, assistant director and chief of adult habilitation services at the school.

Dr. Sternlicht said that misconduct charges have been instituted against an attendant as a result of an incident last February involving alleged abuse of another resident at the school.

In another affidavit submitted by the petitioners, Dr. William Bronston, a clinical physician at the school, said that after Miss Renelli was injured in January he asked that she be transferred to another building because "I could not guarantee her safety."

Dr. Bronston said the patient had been assigned to Building 22 where she was in a ward with 60 other severely handicapped women with three or less attendants present at any one time and that the "normal violence of her environment was compounding her injuries."

She was then transferred to Building 23 where, though less crowded, she was subjected to the same situation as in Building 22 because there was a lack of program, and facilities "made it impossible to serve even the basic needs of the patient," Dr. Bronston said.

After she was injured the second time, she was transferred to the surgical-medical building when Dr. Bronston insisted that her life was in danger.

The petition is directed against the state Mental Hygiene Department; Mental Hygiene Commissioner Allen Miller; Willowbrook, and Dr. Hammond.

While reserving decision on the petition, Justice Vito J. Titone gave both sides until Wednesday to submit additional legal papers.