

# Special panel opens hearings on Willowbrook

By DAN DOLGIN

The American Poor People's Youth Conference Commission on Health and Education listened to testimony from parents of two Willowbrook State School patients, a former social worker there and a representative of Bronx Congressman Mario Biaggi yesterday afternoon, in the first of three days of hearings on the situation at Willowbrook State School.

Assemblyman Andrew Stein and Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton, originally scheduled to attend the hearing, didn't show up.

Commission chairman David Harris led the inquiry, despite the absence of the two star guests. Harris said the group was acting independently, as a non-profit agency in an "attempt to shed light on the plight of the mentally retarded and to suggest possible alternatives."

The hearings will continue today and tomorrow in the eighth-floor studio at 135 114th St., Manhattan. On Wednesday the group will listen to the testimony of Dr. William Bronson, a physician at Willowbrook and see

photographs of alleged child brutality.

Mrs. Elizabeth Lee, who was fired from her post as a social worker at the school last January, insisted that the 5,200-resident institution "must be disestablished.

"Institutions this large are self-defeating. They are expensive and hard to maintain and do not accomplish what they are designed to do," she said.

Mrs. Lee claims she was fired by former Willowbrook director Dr. Jack Hammond for "speaking to the press and stirring up parents to take an active role in their children's lives in Willowbrook."

Mrs. Lee contended that the solution to the care of the retarded "must be in small community controlled programs," rather than large state-operated centers such as Willowbrook.

Still working at Willowbrook as a volunteer, Mrs. Lee admitted that several changes in policy had occurred in recent months but attributed them to legal action brought by the New York Civil Liberties Union and the Legal Aid Society for alleged actions against Willowbrook residents.

"We are witnessing now, in the light of the pending suit, an attempt on the part of the State Department of Mental Hygiene to stay in control, but as long as the state sees the problem of mental retardation as one of removing children from families, then the institutionalized system of care can never be a success," she said.

Thomas Cronin, executive assistant to Biaggi, gave the group his support and offered Biaggi's aid in pending legal actions.

The group also listened to Mrs. Eleanor Best, the mother of a 16-year-old resident of Willowbrook, who claimed that lines of communication within the school were so poor and attendants so poorly qualified that her son started to go blind from cataracts that were never cared for.

Another mother, Mrs. Vici Schnepps, claimed, "Dr. Hammond actually threatened us with the health of our child, because of our involvement in her affairs at the school."

Mrs. Schnepps said she was with the Women's Organization for Retarded Children and her husband with the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children.