

Thefts exacting big toll at Willowbrook

Official puts yearly loss up to \$3 million

By ELAINE BOIES

Pssst! Hey! Want to replenish your depleted linen closet for practically nothing? Just hop on over to the Fox Hills area of Staten Island any day of the week, and you can pick up some good, serviceable bed sheets for a dollar apiece.

They're not luxury percales, of course, but if your initials happen to be WSS you'll get a free, luxury bonus of a ready-made monogram.

Because the sheets belong to Willowbrook State School, they're part of the "petty" pilferage that's costing the institution between \$1.5 and \$3 million annually. The figures add up to between 5 and 10 per cent of the school's annual operating budget, a loss that would severely cripple most household and small business budgets.

And Willowbrook property has traveled far beyond Fox Hills. One staff member returned recently from a trip to Puerto Rico and reported that clotheslines waving in the balmy breezes there were "full of Willowbrook stuff."

While clothing and bedding comprise the greatest amount of loss, almost anything goes. Television sets, record players, typewriters, food, maintenance, office and medical supplies — you name it, it's been there and gone.

Parents blame the administration for a disregard of basic human decency in letting children go diaperless. But three weeks ago, some 14,400 new diapers were put into

circulation; today, nearly 600 of them have disappeared, and no one can track them down.

Theft is rampant at the beleaguered institution for the retarded. The culprits are rarely caught. But there are forces at work that suggest the thieves' carnival at Willowbrook may soon be coming to an end.

For the past nine weeks now, a big, wry man named Harry Eliazarian has been digging into its darkest corners and closets, taking detailed inventories, compiling copious reports, and working out a master plan to catch a thief.

Before taking the position as deputy director for administration, Eliazarian had been superintendent of a state hospital in Bangor, Maine, but expressed an interest in Willowbrook because, he said, "I just like a challenge."

In the area of theft alone, his challenge is a formidable one. Employees on all levels, residents, former residents and outsiders are all in on the massive rip-off, very little of which ever gets reported.

"The three blind mice, that's what we have here," Eliazarian said the other day. "Attendants are afraid of their co-workers, afraid for lives, if they 'write them up' in a report."

The deputy director is coping with an over-all problem of poor supervision and low employee morale, and has taken steps in recent weeks to strengthen security and prevent "malicious" breaking in.

The security force has been more than doubled — from 10 to 24 — but even that doesn't begin to adequately cover the 50-building, 368-acre compound.

Eliazarian's hiring authority

is severely limited by job lines set down by the state Mental Hygiene Department. Since the new thrust is to improve "clinical" services, the supportive ones, like security and maintenance, suffer in the balance.

If, for example, the deputy director has an opening for a security guard, he may retitle the position "nurse," in order to boost the medical staff, but he may not hire a guard or a plumber instead of health services personnel.

FOURTH BURGLARY

Last Monday Eliazarian found on his desk reports of two buildings that had been broken into over the weekend. Scissors, light bulbs, knives and other petit larceny items were missing, closets and desks had been ransacked. One report noted it was the fourth invasion of that particular occupational therapy unit in the past three months.

But the magicians with the "now you see it, now you don't" tricks up their sleeves may soon be caught without their jackets on.

Referring specifically to the laundry, which has become the stage for most of the disappearing acts, Eliazarian said, "In about three months, hopefully, we'll have a damned good system of tagging, accountability and responsibility built in."

And throughout the "city within a city" he is working on a system to have all institutional property coded by an electronic device similar to that used in giant department stores to collar shoplifters.

When an object so marked passes beyond the limits of its usual habitat, it triggers off a buzzer, alerting security personnel to the fact that another piece of Willowbrook is about to go traveling.