

State asks delay in Willowbrook hiring

By JOAN MOTYKA

The state Department of Mental Hygiene says it has been unable to comply with the first deadline of last month's court order to increase the number of ward attendants at Willowbrook State School and tomorrow will seek an extension during a consultation with Federal Court Judge Orrin G. Judd.

The order called for an increase in the number of ward attendants to provide caregiving services, at the ratio of one attendant per nine residents, to be implemented by today.

According to statistics from the office of the deputy commissioner for mental retardation and children's services, Robert W. Hayes, there were 1,797 attendants actually available for duty in Willowbrook wards as of April 30.

To comply with the court order, the total must be raised to 1,815. The Department of Mental Hygiene claims that with an extension until June 30, it will be able to comply with the order and have a "cushion" of additional attendants as well.

Harold Wolfe of the Department of Mental Hygiene claimed that, with current and planned training programs, by the end of June there should be a net gain of 109 available attendants. In his calculations he subtracted the average monthly loss of 24 attendants.

"At the rate we're bringing in new people, despite the losses, we believe we'll be in compliance by the end of June and have some cushion beyond the bare minimum to compensate for day-to-day absences and emergencies," Wolfe claimed.

Dr. William Bronston, medical and psychiatric doctor

for Willowbrook's Building 23, claimed, however, there has been no increase in the number of attendants. He joined Jerry Gavin, president-elect of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, in calling the figures "impossible."

"The order was ignored," Bronston claimed. "Willowbrook administrators and the state Department of Mental Hygiene have resisted responding to responsibility all along."

Gavin claimed that the state's consideration of "available" attendants was different from the actual "on-duty" tally, adding that what also must be taken into account are days off, vacations, absences without leave and sick days of attendants.

While questioning the state's figures, he implied that its use of logic only clouded the issue.

"If the state claims there is only a shortage of 18 attendants, why does it need an extension to increase the number to 109?" he asked.

In reference to the "cushion" of additional attendants, he further demanded: "Since when has the state deemed it necessary to have a cushion of over 100 attendants?"

The crux of the problem, according to Bronston and Gavin, is that the Willowbrook administration and the Department of Mental Hygiene have

reneged in their responsibility to provide humane services to the nearly 4,200 residents of Willowbrook State School.

"The state utterly ignored doing a first hand investigation," Bronston claimed. "It purposely misinterpreted the order. People assigned to the buildings were counted in as ward staff, including nurses, physical therapists and even cleaners. They are not looking

at the function of attendants, and are using every shortcut they can.

"In this instance, the facts only confuse the issue. People are still being injured and are dying and there is still inadequate food and a need for clothing," he added.

Judge Judd's April 10 ruling called on the state to increase the number of attendants, nurses, physical therapists and recreation staff, to prevent seclusion of residents, to repair all toilets and to approve a contract with an accredited hospital to care for Willowbrook's acutely ill.

Today was the deadline for the increase in attendants, while May 31 was decided as the deadline for increase in all other personnel and for the contract with a hospital.

According to Wolfe, the state is now working on meeting the personnel and hospital contract deadlines.

He said that the point in the order prohibiting seclusion was implemented immediately after the ruling and that toilets have been repaired.

"Programs have been set up to keep toilets in good repair," he said. "This doesn't mean that toilets will not break down, but that there are now programs which will see that toilets are repaired within a day or two of the reported breakdown."

Wolfe claimed that the state was seeking an extension of the attendant hiring order to allow for more time either to hire additional attendants or to reduce the number of residents.

He stressed that the state could comply with the order in two ways: Hire additional attendants or reduce the popula-