

Court gives state week on Willowbrook hiring

By JOAN MOTYKA

Federal Court Judge Orrin G. Judd yesterday reserved judgment on the request by the state Department of Mental Hygiene to extend the deadline of implementing a ratio of one attendant to nine residents at Willowbrook State School.

The state asked an extension until June 30, since it claimed it was unable to comply with the original deadline of last Tuesday.

Judd ordered the state to submit a report by May 25 on its progress.

The state claimed it needed the additional time to train and recruit the attendants necessary to meet the ordered ratio as well as others who would serve as a "cushion" surplus.

Harold Wolfe of the Department of Mental Hygiene said Tuesday that the state was in near compliance of the order but needed the extension to "comply with the full practical impact of the order."

Judge Judd on April 10 ruled that there must be a one-to-nine ratio of attendants to residents in Willowbrook wards during all waking hours.

Relief factors, including lunch breaks, vacation, time for transportation of residents, absence of attendants with or without leave, and sick days must also be provided for. The one-to-nine ratio is also to be maintained at these times.

Although the state claimed it was in near compliance of the order, an investigation conducted yesterday by attorneys representing Willowbrook residents showed a "desperate" need for attendants.

The investigatory team included Bruce Ennis of the New York Civil Liberties Union and Robert L. Feldt of the Staten Island office of the Legal Aid Society.

In the 12 buildings visited there was a severe shortage of attendants on duty with the residents. Although in one ward there was a ratio of one attendant to five residents, most

averaged a ratio of one to 18.

In one ward there were 40 residents in a day room with no attendants, and in another one attendant for 61 residents.

In ward after ward attendants complained of understaffing. In one ward an attendant said the children could not be taken outdoors because the attendants had too many other things to do.

Another claimed that more attendants were needed to provide adequate toilet assistance.

In one ward a single attendant supervised 31 spastic residents. She sat in the middle of the room, stringing beads, and waited for the three other attendants who were on lunch break.

FEWER ON HAND

In most cases, the number of attendants present in wards when the team came through was less than the number that was assigned to the wards.

The court order specifies that the one-to-nine ratio must be maintained in spite of all relief factors. Attendants who are taking breaks, transporting residents or absent must be covered to maintain the ordered ratio.

The April 10 order also specified that all toilets must be repaired since "basic hygiene standards" were not being met. Wolfe said Monday that the state has already complied with this point in the order.

The investigation yesterday showed, however, at least one broken toilet in most wards.

One attendant stated that a broken toilet in her ward had been reported "about a month ago" and that it still remained unfixed.

Another stated that the ordered ratio of one to nine was really inadequate in her ward. The residents needed total care; they had to be bathed, fed, dressed and cared for completely.

In another ward with this situation, the attendant suggested that a ratio of one to four might be sufficient.

"We must do everything for them," she said.

In wards where the residents are not ambulatory, it takes two attendants to lift a person. The time involved to do all the required lifting decreases the amount of other services the attendants can provide.

NURSE CRITICAL

"I don't know why, but they seem to put more help in buildings where the kids can do things for themselves," one nurse noted. She said in total care wards, one to five would be a "safe ratio." The development of this side issue to the ordered one-to-nine ratio indicates that if the state were to comply with the order, it would still be inadequate in many cases.

The other problem in the state's expected compliance with the order involves the high turnover and absenteeism rates that are daily faced in Willowbrook wards.

"The terrible situation leads to demoralization that results in the high incidence of quitting and absence with or without leave," Feldt claimed.

"Even if the state hires 300 additional attendants to make the order tomorrow, with the attrition rate as it is, within a month's time, Willowbrook will be back below level," he added.

The problem of clothing was not ruled on in Judd's April decision because he was assured clothing was sufficient.

Yet yesterday's investigation found just the opposite.

"The laundry problem is terrible," one team leader asserted. "One day we sent out 300 pairs of pants and received back only 150."

He said that in some of the wards of his building blind children could receive sensitivity therapy. They could go

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