

Improvements soon vanish, says Levitt report

State study raps supervision at Willowbrook

By DAVID O. STEWART

A state audit released today by Controller Arthur Levitt sharply criticizes conditions at Willowbrook State School and presents a precise and sometimes gruesome list of the mental institution's inadequacies, many of which were laid at the feet of inadequate supervision by the school administration.

Spotlighting unsanitary physical conditions, inadequate employe supervision and neglect of

the patients at the facility, the study is based on two months of visits to Building 20 at Willowbrook last July and August.

The report notes that the initial recommendations made by the auditors were adopted, but that one month after the study was completed, "Signs of adverse hygienic conditions had started to reappear and there was evidence of retrogression in the building rehabilitation."

Building 20, which "represents a microcosm of all that is wrong at Willowbrook," according to the study, houses 251 ambulatory, male adult retardates.

The facility, which was designed for only 188 patients, houses four wards, and 82 employes work there.

The report states: "The most upsetting condition of Building 20 was the feces and urine on the walls and floors of the

dormitories, hallways and bathroom facilities and the accompanying stench. The building was infested with

vermin and many major items (windows, toilets, fountains, locks) were in disrepair."

Proposals for more extensive cleanup operations and a vermin extermination program were submitted, but in April of this year the auditors returned to find such services "disorganized and incomplete."

Citing the general improvement in the wards during the period of the audit last summer, the report notes, "It is evident from this that there is an immediate need for improved supervision."

On two early visits, the document relates, the auditors found most of the patients in the ward naked, and one attendant reading a newspaper and another sleeping in a chair.

"These conditions apparently resulted from the indifference of both the ward personnel and supervisors since, as our presence in the building became more frequent, the frequency of nakedness was less and less," the report continues. "In addition, our unscheduled day, night and weekend visits apparently had the effect of keeping the wards attended and the attendants awake."

The state also criticizes the large number of unauthorized leaves without pay and tardiness of the staff, claiming that in one 16-week period, the 82 employes of Building 20 list-

ed more than 200 days of authorized absence and about 140 instances of tardiness.

"This resulted in an unplanned reduction of patient care because the school was unable to fill the positions to cover for employees," the report maintains.

The auditors commend the present director of Willowbrook, Dr. Miodrag Ristich, for "significant improvement" in disciplining the staff, pointing out that Ristich has instituted 38 disciplinary proceedings in less than a year, where his predecessor had held only six in the previous 18 months.

Ristich took over as acting director in July, and became permanent director in October.

One of the results of the overcrowding at Willowbrook and the lax staff performance, the report states, was repeated failure of the institution to evaluate the patients in accordance with a federal statute, which calls for patient evaluations every six months.

"We found that 184 of the 251 patients in Building 20 had never been evaluated and that 47 patients had been evaluated once in the spring of 1971," the auditors relate.

The school administration has begun a program to complete the evaluations, but the procedure will take at least a year. The state audit calls for a stepped-up effort on evaluations and

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suggests they be made at four-month intervals in the future.

The controller's study also singles out for criticism the handling of patient's financial records.

"While required patient records such as the nursing care plan and the motivation form were not being maintained currently, there was a set of index cards in the office showing the up-to-date cash balance for each patient," the report states.

"It has been our experience that this type of financial information should not be available to ward personnel responsible for custody of the patients," the auditors continue, suggesting that unnecessary purchases might be made on behalf of the patient by the personnel.

The administration defended the practice, noting that when clothing and other necessities are to be purchased, the staff "must know that these items can be purchased from the patient's funds rather than from state funds."

The state audit scores inadequate safety precautions as well, particularly the housing of three blind patients on the second floor of the building.

"On July 20, 1972, one of the blind patients was injured after falling from a second story window which was opened and unscreened for washing," the study says. The patients were transferred to the first floor.

Also mentioned as a safety hazard are 34 broken windows throughout the building.

Among the other facilities the auditors found broken or missing were five toilet bowls, six toilet seats, four toilet flush buttons, seven sink push buttons, two water fountains, one shower control, one shower drain, one bed and two mirrors.

Inadequate laundry facilities are also cited on occasion, leaving the patients undressed for lack of clean clothes.

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