

New Report on Willowbrook

By GEORGE ARZT

Poor administration at Willowbrook is the major reason for the "primitive living conditions" at the state school for the mentally retarded, Controller Levitt said today.

Levitt, in a 20-page report, said that a two-month audit of the Staten Island school last year resulted in a "vast improvement" in the condition of the building examined and the care of the patients. But a surprise visit by his staff to the building only one month after they completed their review showed signs of a relapse into "the former adverse hygienic state."

Unannounced Visits

He said that last July and August his office had joined the Dept. of Mental Hygiene, which administers the institution, in a project to identify and correct conditions in one of the 27 dormitories. He described the dormitory as "a microcosm of all that was wrong at Willowbrook."

Levitt's staff made unannounced visits to the dormitory—identified as Building 20—at different hours of the

day and night and during weekends to observe employe work habits and patient care.

Building 20 is a two-story structure with a capacity of 138. It has 251 male adult retardates.

Levitt said: "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 accompanying stench. The building was infested with vermin and many major items (windows, toilets, fountains, locks, etc.) were in disrepair."

He also found, contrary to a directive of the Division of Mental Retardation calling for an evaluation of each case every six months, 184 of the 250 patients in the building had never been evaluated. The six-month check is also required for federal reimbursement through the medicaid program and for hospital accreditation.

The building supervisor, the auditors also found, remained in his office most of the time "limiting his activi-

ty to answering the telephone."

Among other problems, Levitt cited the following:

¶Written staff assignments were not given and employe productivity was "questionable." The auditors found one employe reading newspapers and another asleep. Wards were also found unattended.

¶From April 13 through August 2, the 82 employes assigned to the building were docked more than 200 days' pay for unauthorized leave and were late 140 times.

¶The laundry system was "greatly disorganized" which made clothes unavailable for patients. "We found an entire ward in the nude on one occasion," said the report.

¶Fire and safety laws were not adhered to. The door to the fire equipment was jammed. Three blind patients who were supposed to be housed on the bottom floor, were on the second floor. One of them was injured falling through an open window.

As time progressed, the building was cleaned and painted. The patients were dressed daily and the staff "appeared to be on their feet directing the activities," Levitt said. Evaluations on the patients were also being brought up to date.

'Dampened Hopes'

A visit to the building one month after the review was completed "dampened our prior hopes and feelings of achievement," Levitt said.

Bernard H. Budmen, asst. commissioner of the Dept. of Mental Hygiene, agreed that when supervision, especially from an outside agency, is increased, so does staff productivity.

He added that plans were being drawn up to bring the buildings under a chief of service rather than a nurse and the department's ultimate plans are to reduce the number of patients at Willowbrook so that it will eventually serve only Staten Island.