

Turnover slows progress in staffing at Willowbrook

By JOAN MOTYKA

Defendants and plaintiffs in the Willowbrook State School case will meet today with Judge Orrin G. Judd in Brooklyn Federal Court.

State implementation of the April court order demanding increased hiring and improved conditions will be the major point of discussion.

In an affidavit filed Tuesday in Brooklyn Federal Court, Willowbrook director Dr. Miodrag Ristich outlined the state's progress to date in complying with the order.

Increased hiring of ward attendants has still not produced the court-ordered ratio of one attendant per nine residents for direct, on-the-ward care during daylight hours.

The reasons for lack of compliance, according to Ristich, "lie in a complex of factors," highlighted by a massive turnover rate at the institution.

He noted that between Jan. 17 and June 7, 175 grade seven and nine attendants were hired and 122 of them have since left.

"The ability of Willowbrook to absorb new people appears to be sharply curtailed above a certain point," he said in the affidavit. "The only real permanent solution remains depopulation."

Other reasons cited for lack of compliance on the attendant issue are miscalculation and absenteeism. The original assessment of needs was inadequate; on-paper calculations of administrators did not result in on-the-ward care Relief factors, like vacation, absence without leave and sick days, were not fully accounted for.

DAILY RECORDS

To remedy the problem, daily attendance records for each building were examined for eight sample weeks. The total figure representing the number of people to replace absentees has been estimated, and a pool of replacement workers will be established.

Dr. Ristich noted that, given the current size and distribution of the resident population, 2,171 attendants are required. As of June 14, 1,846 are available for ward service. Another 37 began training yesterday.

Twenty-eight persons presently employed at Willowbrook will be reassigned to ward service and an additional 260 persons must still be hired.

A four-pronged effort at compliance of the attendant issue is currently under way at Willowbrook according to Ristich.

Training programs, enabling 50 ward attendants to be hired every two weeks, are in progress. However, of these 50, an average of 12 are lost. On a monthly basis, 25 per cent of the trainees do not complete the program.

The second step entails grouping residents in multiples of nine, with one attendant assigned to each group and responsible for the care of residents and their safety.

In addition to permanent hiring, Willowbrook is attempting to recruit 300 college students for the summer to work two shifts from 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

ASSIGN DUTIES

The students will be assigned to work with a group and attendant and will perform custodial and recreational functions. Supervisors will assign them to duties they feel the students are capable of handling.

Dr. Ristich, in an interview yesterday, claimed the students will not be used to pad attendant figures for compliance of the court order.

"We're just hiring them on a summer basis," he said.

The students will be given an orientation and on-the-job training. To date, approximately 200 students have been recruited.

The fourth step entails the transfer of residents, since lowering the institution's population is one way of meeting the 1-to-9 ratio. However, in the past two months, the transfer process has slowed down, since the other institutions Willowbrook residents are being sent to are being filled.

New plans, including the transfer of as many as 400 residents to a family care program upstate, are being formulated.

Willowbrook, in attempting to place residents in foster homes and other institutions, ideally prefers to keep residents in their own geographical area.

Dr. Ristich noted, however, that family care homes are "hard to find in the city" and that, if a resident is ready for family care, it should be made available regardless of distance.