

School's fire boxes to get special locks

By ROBERT A. WILLIAMS

A Willowbrook State School official said yesterday that the end is apparently near for a wave of false fire alarms which is plaguing the institution and stripping a large part of Staten Island of adequate fire protection.

Harry Eliazarian, deputy administrator of Willowbrook, explained that the mounting number of false alarms being sent from a host of locations in the complex will probably halt with the installation of special locks on all fire alarm boxes which are accessible to patients.

Since mid-May, firemen have been called to Willowbrook as many as 15 times a day. In most cases, the alarms proved to be false.

No one has yet been apprehended in the institution for sending a false alarm.

"Everybody's upset over the situation," Battalion Chief Roy Johnsen said from his West Brighton office, adding that Fire Department officials are concerned about maintaining adequate fire protection for the remainder of the Island. "If another alarm comes in from the Willowbrook area while we're on one of these false alarm runs, there's a delay in getting additional fire units to that second location."

Firemen, in fact, responded to the institution 214 times during a 45-day period in May and June. Units were dispatched for 18 false alarms in the last two days.

Each alarm which is transmitted from Willowbrook draws Engine Co. 166 and Ladder Co. 86 from Graniteville, Engine Co. 163 and Ladder Co. 83 from Westerleigh, Engine Co. 154 from Travis, a battalion chief from West Brighton and a deputy chief from the Concord division headquarters.

Although the wave of alarms is new to Fire Department personnel, it has been fairly common at the institution.

According to a Fire Department source, fire officials discovered during a routine inspection in April that the institution had not been reporting false alarms to the department.

The alarm system at Willowbrook is an internal one. When a box is pulled at one of the locations in the complex, the signal does not go directly to the Fire Department Communications Center in Castleton Corners but instead, goes to Willowbrook's telephone switchboard room.

A staff person on duty at the switchboard would then determine the location of the alarm by consulting a lighted board, call that area by telephone and ask supervisory personnel if there was a fire.

When there was no evidence of fire, no report was made to the Fire Department; when there was evidence of fire, the staffer at the switchboard would activate a special fire alarm box in his area and fire units would be dispatched to the scene.

352 FALSE ALARMS

The Fire Department source indicated that during a period from March 8 to May 16, for example, records show that 352 false alarms were transmitted in the institution but were not reported to the Fire Department.

"It's pretty serious, because there's that delay in notifying us if they do spot a fire," Deputy Fire Chief Salvatore Valenza said of the situation.

Chief Valenza explained that Fire Department officials immediately notified Willowbrook that all alarms were to be transmitted to the department.

Fire marshals who investigated the surge in false alarm activity found that no one particular location was used to transmit the boxes. Patients in

most of the buildings are left to roam the halls and, in most cases, have access to the fire alarm boxes in the hallways.

It was also felt that if a patient was caught sending a false alarm, little could be done to prosecute the individual because of the nature of the institution.

WROTE TO STATE

Robert Perez, secretary to Fire Commissioner Robert O. Lowery, said yesterday that the commissioner last month wrote to the state Department of Mental Hygiene, which operates Willowbrook, advising the department of the hazardous situation and requesting assistance with a solution.

Perez said that a response from the Department of Mental Hygiene indicated that the installation of special locks on the boxes will probably cut the number of false alarms.

"We've ordered special locks and keys from a Midwest firm and as soon as the equipment arrives we'll make adjustments to our alarm system," Eliazarian said. The administrator added that, under the new system, supervisory personnel will have special keys which will activate the boxes when required.

Meanwhile, Fire Department units continue to respond to Willowbrook. Although they move to the scene as quickly as usual, they do, however, turn off lights and sirens when they enter the Willowbrook grounds.

"We still get our share of brush and rubbish fires in Willowbrook, so we can't really take our time responding when that box comes in," Capt. Charles Badenhop of Ladder Co. 86, said. Ladder Co. 86, a tower ladder unit, is the first ladder company scheduled to arrive at Willowbrook alarms.