

Mishandling of patients' \$132,000 fund alleged

Willowbrook audit spotlights financial quirks

By DAVID O. STEWART

An audit of Willowbrook State School released by the state controller's office today roundly criticized almost every aspect of the institution's practices and levelled thinly-veiled allegations of financial irregularities in both purchasing procedures and the handling of patients' personal funds.

The 127-page report covered the two-year period before July 1972 and repeated most of the charges against Willowbrook which have come from many

quarters over the last few years.

But the audit added allegations of mishandling patients' cash fund balances, which totaled \$132,000 for fiscal year 1972. The cash fund balances are established by the patients' families to cover personal purchases, which are made by ward personnel.

"An analysis of these purchases showed that some individual residents' accounts were charged with hundreds of dollars of personal purchases yearly," the report stated. "We

were not able to locate most of the items bought with these funds in the patients' buildings. We also question the need or reasonableness of many of these purchases."

The auditors pointed out that the employes making the purchases for the patients "are aware of the mental capabilities of each patient and if there are relatives or friends interested in the resident's welfare."

Among the specific cases cited by the report were:

● A man classified as a "low-grade soiler," referring to

his ability to take care of his personal hygiene, who was charged with purchases of \$737 for one year, including a shaver, two watches, a winter coat, a winter jacket, a raincoat, a blazer, a sport jacket and a poplin jacket. The auditors searched this man's possessions and could only find several shirts and pairs of trousers, but none of the other items.

● A man charged with \$529 in purchases who only retained two of the 18 pairs of trousers purchased, along with only two of 21 polo shirts bought.

● A 10-year-old girl classified as a wetter and a soiler who spent \$816 for 20 dresses, 12 pairs of summer slacks, 21 pairs of corduroy slacks, 24 pairs of flannel pajamas, 20 pairs of cotton pajamas, 12 pairs of shorts and 13 pairs of cotton slacks.

In the case of the young girl, the auditors added, "The building supervisor informed us that the purchases had been made not because of the patient's needs but to reduce the resident's account balance to a level that assured that the

maintenance rate would not be raised." If a resident's cash balance is high, his maintenance rate is often raised.

The report also criticized the handling of the patient's money in interest accounts, pointing out that only 12 per cent of the accounts received any interest under the state's complex financial regulations.

Of the almost \$30,000 earned by the patient's accounts, only \$6,787 went to the patients, with the rest going into a "school account."

Also in the financial area, the

auditors scored the school store for earning \$225,000 profit last year without making any effort to use the money for "patient benefit" or to reduce prices.

In addition, the report alleged "There was ample evidence that efforts were not made to obtain the most reasonable prices in accordance with state regulations on Willowbrook State School purchases.

"Orders were split to avoid competitive bidding requirements, the bidders' list was inadequate, and in general, there was an open circum-

vention of the applicable purchasing rules."

The auditors singled out the Empire Sales Co., which made sales of \$44,000 to the school for fiscal 1971 without benefit of a single contract.

"Large numbers of purchase orders to this contractor were written for amounts just under \$300 or just under \$500. The quantities ordered usually were odd amounts because an increase of one unit would have increased the dollar amount to over the limit," and would have altered the regulations controlling the purchase, the audit said.

"Of nine clothing contracts that were awarded to other than the lowest bidder," the audit continued, "seven were awarded to Empire." The auditors called the proposals for these orders "vague or overly restrictive," in order to insure that only a certain bidder would qualify.

The auditors made numerous recommendations for tightening up the financial procedures of the institution. Dr. Alan Miller, head of the state Mental

Hygiene Department, claimed that almost all of the proposals have now been implemented as regular Willowbrook policy.

Personal purchases must now be approved by the physician in charge and the supervising nurse, Miller said, and split orders "will not be tolerated." He also said bidding and purchasing procedures have been regularized.

Prominent among the other recommendations made by the audit were several proposals for better security and safety units

on the school grounds. Many of the audit's points have been made several times in the past by reviewing agencies, covering a wide range of failings now familiar to those who have followed the Willowbrook situation.

Overcrowding, which the Mental Hygiene Department says it is trying to reduce, was emphasized in the audit, along with inadequate review of a patient's progress and failure to provide educational opportunities for almost three-fourths of those 4,000 residents potentially eligible for regular instruction.

A major target of the report was management and employe performance, or lack of, especially the large number of vacancies on the staff which combines with high absenteeism to leave the school almost continually under-staffed.

In addition, the auditors found "many instances of employes who were avoiding work, thus further burdening those who were dedicated to their task."

Their checks of employe attendance and activities found

"instances of employes sleeping on the job, watching television, congregating in building offices, leaving early or arriving late, charging for overtime but without support that they worked the overtime."

The report also dealt at length with the problem of the school's laundry, and proposed that it would be both cheaper and more efficient to arrange for a private laundry service to handle the job.

Dr. Miller responded to the report by pointing out that several planned reforms, including laundry, safety and maintenance improvements, were prevented because the State Legislature cut the requested funds out of the supplemental budget.

Dr. Miller summarized the department's efforts at Willowbrook as working on management and leadership, which he termed "most important."

He pointed to a five-pronged strategy to strengthen the staff, decentralize the operation, segregate patient care and non-patient care functions, and reduce the patient population so that it serves only Staten Island.