

Willowbrook director says goal is to close

By DAVID O. STEWART

It was a familiar scene for Dr. Miodrag Ristich, director of Willowbrook State School for the last year, and his assistant, Harry Eliazarian.

Another stinging and far-reaching critique of Willowbrook had been released — this time by State Controller Arthur Levitt — and the school's two top staffers again had to answer charges of overcrowding, understaffing, unsanitary facilities and incompetent management.

The position was difficult for both men because they admitted that they agree with most of the criticisms of Willowbrook, and because Levitt's report dealt with a 27-month period until June 30, 1972, which is before Dr. Ristich took over at the school.

"Our final goal is to go out of business," Dr. Ristich said yesterday in his office.

Pointing out that the population at Willowbrook has been reduced by 1,000 patients to about 4,000, Dr. Ristich added: "I can't see holding at any figure. It may take 5, 10, 15 years, but the goal is to go out of business."

Until those years pass, though, the monumental problems at Willowbrook which the controller's report cited will continue.

Eliazarian said that the purchasing procedures at the school have been changed to meet the controller's objections, "to our detriment."

Levitt's report had faulted the school for making numerous purchases just under the dollar amount required for competitive bidding. The audit stressed that an unusually large number of these non-competitive contracts went to the Empire Sales Co.

Eliazarian explained yesterday that those purchases under the level required for competitive bidding were intentional, "for emergencies and immediate needs."

"The technique is correct," Eliazarian continued, "but the auditors felt that it violated the spirit of the law. The state's

procedures insure getting supplies for the lowest price, not getting them within 24 hours. Now all contracts can take up to six months. We can't respond to immediate needs."

He agreed with Levitt that a large number of the non-competitively bid contracts went to Empire Sales but said there was no sinister reason for that.

"Empire supplied the best quality clothing at those prices and could deliver within 24 to 48 hours," he said.

On the question of cash fund balances maintained by the residents, which the controller's report contended were subject to many irregularities, Dr. Ristich said that all of these funds are tightly controlled now.

The controller's audit had suggested that unnecessary purchases were being made by

ward personnel on behalf of the patients, and that the articles allegedly bought with the patient's own money could not be found.

Eliazarian said, "We have yet to catch any of the ward personnel" either diverting the patients' funds to their own pockets or pilfering clothing, but

he claimed to have cracked down on the whole system. No longer can one ward attendant make the decision to spend a patient's own money. Several approvals for any purchase are now required, all the way up to Eliazarian, deputy director.

According to Dr. Ristich and Eliazarian, the major problem

at the school, and the one which causes most of the other problems, is an under-trained staff plagued with high turnover and absenteeism, and with inadequate supervisory personnel directing their efforts.

Before Dr. Ristich took over, disciplinary proceedings against employes were rare, since a state hiring freeze made it impossible to replace any worker who was fired, and the whole disciplinary proceeding was "prohibitively expensive in time and money," the director said.

Under those conditions, he

said, "We were likely to put up with a whole lot more from a worker."

But the state and the civil service union have changed the rules on disciplinary proceedings, and the hiring freeze is off. The number of actions against workers has increased and although Dr. Ristich admits that sometimes it hurts morale, he said, "What hurts morale more is the feeling that the management doesn't care."

Among the actions by personnel which the management is trying to stop, Eliazarian said, are sleeping and drinking on duty, leaving early and abusing the patients.

Specific staff shortages are also a major problem, Dr. Ristich said, especially in supervisory positions and in "support services."

This year the school had another 200 openings for supervisors but found only 68 workers at the school who were willing and able to move up in the institution, so the administration has been trying to recruit staff for those positions.

And the situation in "support services" (those not directly related to care of the residents

on the ward, including sewing room, maintenance and administration) is similarly bad.

"Statewide, nationwide, outfits like ours have 30 per cent in support services," Dr. Ristich said. "Now at Willowbrook we have just been able to raise our support staff to 20 per cent of the total. The state keeps throwing in more attendants for ward service, but not for support service."

One of the services most criticized by the controller's report was the laundry operation, which was slow, inefficient and unsanitary, according to the auditors. But the two Willowbrook officials reported that the laundry has now been sub-contracted to a private service, as the report recommended.

The audit also scored the school's lack of housekeeping services to clean the premises,

emphasizing that there were no housekeepers for the patient areas, while seven maids were employed at staff residences on the school grounds.

Eliazarian said that there are now 223 persons in the house-keeping department, which was set up about a year ago.

Despite all these efforts, Dr. Ristich conceded that Willowbrook is not in a satisfactory condition.

"You can see," he said, "that the place looks like it's uncontrolled. Well, it is."

And his decision and the decision of his superiors in the state Department of Mental Hygiene is that a state school of that size simply cannot be controlled. The only goal, as Dr. Ristich said, is to "go out of business" and leave care for the retarded to smaller, better-staffed and better-funded operations.