

Willowbrook issuing ID cards to workers

By DAVID O. STEWART

Willowbrook State School is in the process of issuing picture identification cards to all 4,000 employes as a security measure, Dr. Miodrag Ristich, the school's director, said yesterday.

Responding to charges of lax security leveled by State Sen. Frank Padavan, Dr. Ristich maintained that the institution is making a concerted effort on the security front, but that the court-mandated increase in staffing last year has delayed some of the actions.

Dr. Ristich confirmed Padavan's contention that thefts at the school may total more than a half-million dollars a year and that most crimes have increased at Willowbrook in the past year.

"I'm not serene about these statistics," the Willowbrook official said, "But I don't think they show real deterioration. Of course, I would like to see some progress."

Padavan had charged that Willowbrook failed to increase its security by providing additional patrol cars, issuing vehicle identification stickers, performing spot checks of vehicles leaving the grounds, fencing the perimeter and installing closed circuit television to monitor critical areas.

All of those changes were recommended in a study of Willowbrook security conducted last January by the state police.

Dr. Ristich said two new patrol cars were acquired, although one older car had to be retired, leaving the school with only two vehicles.

He said that a vehicle identification program has been held up by the personal ID card program, which should be completed "within a few weeks." When the personnel system is completed, the vehicle identification effort will begin, he added.

Fencing the perimeter of the school is beyond his means, Dr. Ristich said, since it is a capital project and would have to be provided for in the state budget.

A spokesman for the state Mental Hygiene Department said that burglar alarms have been recently installed in key buildings, and that a contract is being let to set up a radio communications system in the patrol cars.

Sen. Padavan also raised the issue of Willowbrook's hiring practices, pointing to the fact that out of 4,000 employes about 225 have felony arrest records.

The state spokesman said that the figure did not seem "outrageously high" to him, and Dr. Ristich pointed out that the school cannot turn away a job-seeker simply because of a previous arrest record.

"We would like a complete background check," Dr. Ristich said, "but this is a highly fluid labor market with tremendous turnover.

"We do try to evaluate how the individual's record will effect his performance, and assign him accordingly."

All school employes are fingerprinted and checked through the New York State

Identification and Intelligence System, a process that can take several months.

Padavan suggested that a review of prison and probation reports should be undertaken in such cases. Dr. Ristich agreed, but added, "We just don't have the manpower for that."

In another development yesterday, Padavan announced legislation designed to limit the "dumping" of former mental patients into the community.

The bill would require that the state license all corporations and proprietary home receiving former patients to insure proper facilities. The Queens lawmaker estimated that there are 20,000 former mental patients in the city living in unregulated conditions.

"A great number of them are not receiving anywhere near the degree of care and supervision they require," he said.

"Many are being exploited. Abuses cited by the media still go unattended basically because of local government's admitted inability to deal with such a large-scale problem."

Padavan said his bill would provide for "appropriate rules and regulations to be promulgated" by the state Mental Hygiene Department.