

Parents criticize 'lack of concern' at Willowbrook

By SUSAN FRY

Because they say they're not listened to, respected or assisted by the administration of the Willowbrook Developmental Center in the care of their young, parents of Willowbrook residents gathered forces yesterday afternoon and presented their case in front of reporters and television cameras.

After two hours of allegations and rebuttals, laced with personality quirks and emotion, nothing was resolved, although much was attempted.

The Benevolent Society claims, among many things, that the Willowbrook management elicits very little control over ward attendants and other staff workers. One attendant in Building 8 alleged that she was harassed by several other attendants earlier this week.

In a related incident, windows in a car were smashed and tires slashed, according to one observer, who added that administrative officials said those

involved in both incidents would be suspended.

However, she said, everyone reported to work the following day "as usual."

Joyce Libra, an administrative assistant to the director of Willowbrook, Dr. Miodrag Ristich, asserted that there was a paucity of evidence required to suspend and that each incident is being investigated. In the meantime, she said, temporary measures have been taken which include adding extra security to the building and giving the woman who was allegedly harassed the option to transfer to another building. The attendant refused, she said.

Although Willowbrook officials insist that problems between attendants are currently limited to the evening staff in Building 8, members of the Benevolent Society contend that it is an ongoing problem in many of the resident halls.

"There have been many people hired here with serious police offenses in their back-

grounds. I'm not opposed to rehabilitation, but there seems to be little or no screening in the hiring processes," Anthony Pinto, Benevolent Society president claimed.

Another Willowbrook administrator, Michael Mekjian, conceded that the hiring process didn't involve much screening since a federal court mandate last year ordered a nine-to-one ratio of residents to attendants.

Another complaint from the society centered around meals being served to residents. "They're not balanced," they charged, "and too often special diets are not prescribed by doctors and not ordered by the unit chiefs and building supervisors."

Pinto added that in Building

27, where all patients have to be fed by the staff, residents last to be fed have to eat cold food.

"Why can't volunteers, using extra money that some residents have of their own, be hired to help during feeding time?" he asked.

"The problem with paying volunteers is multi-faceted," Donald Fleming, a deputy director, explained.

"First, we have a fiscal bind, so we can't pay more staff and secondly, we are controlled by the state (Department of Mental Hygiene) as to exactly who can be on the grounds on a paid basis."

In answer to the nutrition allegation, Fleming added,

Several Willowbrook officials complained yesterday that the press conference forced them to "respond in a shotgun manner."

"Broad generalizations can blow things out of proportion," Fleming charged. "I feel quite bad that a vast majority of our employees have been caught up

in unsubstantial allegations." Dr. Stanley Slawinski, a clinical administrator, added, "The issues have become so clouded that you don't even know what the issues are."

One issue that everyone agreed on—administration and parents, alike—is that Willowbrook, in its present form, is basically unmanageable.

"There is no accountability here to the taxpayers and residents," one parent claimed, receiving nods of agreement from others gathered around him.

"The state has agreed that Willowbrook is unmanageable, but we are moving as quickly as possible, in a responsible and rational manner, to move residents out of here," Fleming explained.

"We are reducing the size of changes in upgrading conditions for residents or staff."

"We don't want to be forced to go to the press every time something happens. But when these debilitating conditions persist, the press is our last resort," Pinto said.

"This has been corrected."

The Benevolent Society also insisted that the administration has not answered to charges of inadequate recreational and therapeutic programs, such as training "strippers," or those residents who persist in undressing, to keep their clothes on; teaching tooth-brushing and self-feeding.

"These programs are designed and recommended to Ristich, but they never go anywhere, although he claims he'll get to them," Pinto said.

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