

# Lead paint was used at Willowbrook

By SUSAN FRY

Paint with "unacceptably" high lead content was used on two buildings at the Willowbrook Developmental Center, according to tests conducted by the state Office of General Services.

In a report issued earlier this month, test results indicated that red and gray paint on exterior panels of Building 76 contained lead exceeding amounts acceptable by state health codes.

Kenneth Meyer, Willowbrook senior business officer, said paint samples showed lead content of 18 per cent. The state has set a limit of 1 per cent.

However, Meyer added that the panels have since been scraped and repainted.

A sample of paint chips taken from a dayroom wall in Building 21 contained 12.5 per cent lead. Building 21 is one

of two-story resident facilities painted by a commercial firm about eight years ago, Meyer said, adding that it is possible that the other nine buildings were painted with paint containing high lead content.

"We are taking samples of the other buildings, and if necessary, we'll have all two-story interior walls repainted," he said.

"The wall surfaces in Building 21 are not peeling, so any danger is potential, not actual."

The other buildings in question include 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 19, 20, 22 and 23.

Meyer explained that a spot medical check on residents throughout the Willowbrook grounds indicated no signs of lead poisoning.

Before state contracts are issued, bidders must comply with specifications developed by

the state Division of Standards and Purchases in the case of paint. Meyer said the state requires the manufacturing company to comply with the 1 per cent law.

"However, on a contract where the state is hiring a commercial concern, it is extremely exhausting to see that all tools are constantly of the highest quality."

A state inspector oversees the performance of a job, and certainly the state recommends that a contractor follow our specifications; but in actuality, it's an impossible situation to manage," he explained.

A charge by a former Willowbrook employe that the institution painted the exteriors of two buildings last summer with lethal lead-based paint, brought to the attention of the Advance in June, prompted the state to test chips. The painter, Richard Cunningham, has since been fired, although it is not certain if his dismissal was related to his complaints about the paint.

Willowbrook officials claim that Cunningham, who had only been employed there for about five months, was considered "disruptive" by his supervisor and foreman.

However, the painter contended the charges against him were trumped up because of his interest in the lead paint.

Since his dismissal in July, Cunningham, through the Legal Aid Society, has reportedly submitted samples of paint from exteriors of Buildings 76 and 77 to the city Bureau of Lead Poisoning Control.

A chief inspector, Eli Tornick, said that tests indicated a lead content of 28 per cent, although he considered the tests "invalid" since his staff did not collect the sample.

"We have no way of knowing if those samples were really from Buildings 76 and 77," he claimed.

A Legal Aid attorney said affidavits about the source of the chips and test results would be submitted as evidence against the state in a class action suit involving Willowbrook residents, scheduled to reconvene Monday in Brooklyn Federal Court.

The district court entered a wide-ranging decree last year protecting Willowbrook residents from harm and cruel and unusual punishment, rooted in due process and equal protection clauses of the Constitution.

The lead-based paint complaint falls under the protection from harm order, the attorney said.

Plaintiffs' constitutional claims of equal protection and the right to treatment and habilitation will be pursued in court next week.

Medical findings on lead poisoning indicate that a child could suffer brain damage and die if enough lead is consumed.

An official of the Bureau of Lead Poisoning Control reported that a child who ate a small amount of lead-based paint chips daily from about 12 weeks could go into convulsions.

"Strangely enough, some children are just not affected, while others take a long time to show their symptoms. But after symptoms appear, nothing can be done. Brain damage is irreversible," he said.

The official added that adults with lead poisoning usually do not have brain damage or die, but they suffer from stomach cramps, infected gums and teeth and, in some instances, their coordination is disturbed.