

Willowbrook parents ask for answers

By STUART FELD

About 30 sign-toting parents showed up yesterday outside Building 8 at Willowbrook Developmental Center to protest conditions at the school and the conditions surrounding the Oct. 11 death of resident Jaime Rivera.

The parents handed out pamphlets reading, "Let us all put an end to the abuse and neglect of our children. **Unexplained cuts, burns, bruises and deaths on our children are a crime!**"

Another pamphlet was handed out, citing cases of residents choking to death on food, and the death of Juan Roman "due to improper medical treatment."

Alleged acts of revenge also were mentioned, including the Oct. 26 destruction by a torch of six motivation rooms after some attendants were accused of mistreating residents.

Sylvia Rivera, the late boy's sister, said "the purpose of this demonstration is to tell about the conditions at the hospital and to find out what's going on about the death of my brother. I think he was killed. I was told many different stories about his death, none of which match up."

The 18-year-old youth was found dead beside his bed Oct. 11 in Building 8. Police and James A. Forde, acting director of the institution, ruled the death accidental, due to a fall. One interim report from the medical examiner indicated the youth had sustained brain injury with several deep lacerations. Willowbrook officials held that the death was due to a fracture of the skull.

Other parents leveled charges that some attendants drink and sleep on the job, and that an attendant in ward 29 died three weeks ago of a heroin overdose while on duty.

Mr. and Mrs. James Alexander of Mariners Harbor claimed they were threatened when they went into Building

13 to pick up their son. "My son was lying in the middle of the room nude, and before taking him outside, I was told I had to dress him myself," Alexander said.

After exchanging words with an attendant, Alexander maintains the attendant said, "I want to know your name, where you live, so I can take care of you."

Mrs. Alexander said another attendant tried to attack her.

When an attendant in Building 13 was asked about the incident, she said that while she had heard conflicting stories, "I don't want to say anything. I don't want to find a bomb in my car."

After two hours of braving the numbing winds, the demonstration turned into a sign-carrying caravan of cars that circled around the center, finally stopping in front of Building 13.

It was in Building 13 that nine residents were found with "dime-sized burns" the weekend of Oct. 26.

In the building's center, ward residents were crawling around or dragging themselves on the floor nude, and huddling under tables. Other residents had cuts on their heads and faces.

"They take off their clothes as fast as we put them on. How can we make them keep them on?" one attendant asked.

The many cuts visible on the residents were almost invariably explained as the result of "falls."

One attendant declared, "They blame the wrong people about the conditions — blame the state. We don't get enough money for clothes and supplies."

While it was commonly acknowledged to be one of the best buildings in Willowbrook, Building 13 workers also have their gripes, especially concerning its physician, Dr. Bernard Goodman.

Attendants stated that he "has a nasty attitude," citing as evidence the contention that he is not allowed to enter certain buildings because of his alleged bad manners.

Three nurses have already quit because of him and we're understaffed as a result," an attendant said.

Dr. Goodman could not be reached for comment.

The Willowbrook parents say they will return next week, and that they are currently drafting letters about the situation to their congressmen and assemblymen.