

State denies patients plan, but...

By S. LAINE GOLDSTEIN

Reacting to a story in the Sunday Advance, a state Department of Mental Hygiene official said yesterday there are "no plans" to place Harlem Valley Psychiatric Center patients in Staten Island mental health facilities.

"There is no truth to the statement that there are plans to send patients from Harlem Valley to Staten Island," declared James A. Forde, director of the department's Mid-Hudson region. Forde is also the interim director of the Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Nevertheless, the mental health sources who originally revealed that as many as 1,000 psychiatric patients may be targeted for placement here reaffirmed their statements, saying: "We stand by what we have said."

Asked if they would testify to that under oath in a court of law, the sources said they would.

The original information — and the focus of the controversy — is a letter, primarily aimed at recruiting staff, written by Dr. Yoosuf A. Haveliwala, director of Harlem Valley, located in Dutchess County. Stating that its present inpatient population is a little over 1,700, the letter continues:

"We estimate that approximately 1,000 of our patients will be ready for placement in the community by next summer."

When a copy of the letter was obtained by the Advance, several mental health professionals said it was their opinion that Staten Island would get many, if not all, of these patients.

Forde disagrees. "This was a recruitment letter sent, I believe, to all psychiatrists and was meant to show that staff would be involved in community-based programs as well as hospital programs," he says.

"The letter was designed to show physicians that this is a dynamic program that is not

continued "custodial care," Forde claims.

The mental health professionals refused to back down from their interpretation. "Obviously, Haveliwala made a big boo-boo by sending the letter," one psychiatrist said.

Dr. Haveliwala, formerly a deputy director of the South Beach Psychiatric Center, requested and received a copy of Sunday's story. He said he would respond at some future date.

Forde said that Harlem Valley had released 400 patients since June and that 90 per cent had been placed within Dutchess County. He said there are currently six Islanders at Harlem Valley who might be transferred here "only if acceptable for release."

Forde added, however, that three Harlem Valley patients — all of whom have city, but not Staten Island residences — were placed in Island nursing homes in the past month.

The state official said that most of the released patients are put into family care, with regular checks by the hospitals.

None of what Forde said appeared to sway the sources contacted by the Advance. They said that "no amount" of statements warning the communities about this policy would affect the state.

"You can't change their minds," they said of the Mental Hygiene Department.