

2 legislators pay surprise visit to Willowbrook

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Scurrying roaches and scared employes greeted members of the State Assembly, Elizabeth Connelly and Angelo Del Toro, last night in an unannounced tour of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Not pleased with what they found, the two legislators said they expected to press in the Assembly for tighter security, improved supportive services and better screening of employes.

For Del Toro, a freshman assemblyman from Manhattan's East Side, it was his first visit to the controversial Staten Island institution for the retarded. Del Toro shook his head in apparent disgust throughout the four-building tour.

"There must be a better way to take care of the retarded," Del Toro said.

"Sometimes," said Mrs. Connelly, "you just stop and ask yourself why."

Grim-faced, Mrs. Connelly's husband, Robert, noted: "Enough visits to Willowbrook and you really appreciate what you have."

Among the conditions the legislators encountered were roaches in a kitchen, open windows in a ward where about 25 residents were sleeping, understaffed wards that did not meet court-mandated 9-to-1 staff-patient levels and

staff members who were afraid to talk about conditions and other employes.

In Building 7, which houses ambulant males from 17 years old to young adults, the legislators received three unwanted surprises.

First, in a second-floor bathroom, water covered the tile floor. Around one toilet was a pile of littered clothes.

Second, in a ward with about 25 sleeping residents, 11 of 17 windows were wide open. The attendant and building supervisor said that no one in the building had a key to open the screens and close the outside windows. Observers estimated the room temperature at between 40 and 50 degrees.

Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, who was on the tour, located a security man who promised to close the windows.

The third surprise came as the group entered a downstairs kitchen. The lights were flicked on and roaches scurried from the floors.

The first stop on the legislators' tour was Building 16, an infant building with severely retarded handicapped children. On one ward, 52 patients were counted but only three attendants could be found.

A nurse on duty explained that the other three attendants were around the building somewhere.

The nurse, visibly upset

about the tour, said that some of the employes "really give you a rough time. You have to watch them like a cat," she said.

The legislators entered Building 16 soon after dinner, during shower time for the residents. Pinto explained, however, that the staff complement on duty at that time leaves at 8:30.

If the bathing process was not completed, many residents would not get washed. The state, he said, offers no overtime compensation to employes. And the residents are the losers in the end, he added.

Standing next to a pile of just washed pajama outfits, one attendant said: "I wouldn't put these things on. We're supposed to get clean clothes every day. But we don't always."

"Look at these," she said, holding up pair after pair of tattered pajamas.

The tour's next stop, Building 26, produced some smiles for the legislators. Residents were lying in beds, apparently clean and bathed. There was little odor of human waste as could be easily detected in other wards.

"This is the way all the wards should be," Mrs. Connelly said.

The final stop for Mrs. Connelly and Del Toro was in Building 32 where ambulant

male and female patients reside. The patients are long-time residents of Willowbrook. Some, according to Pinto, are being readied for community living.

Although the small rooms for each resident were furnished with the bare minimum—dresser, bed, sink—the rooms were clean. Unlike Building 7, the walls of Building 32 were brightly painted.

In the lobby of Building 32, Mrs. Connelly wondered aloud why more of these residents couldn't be in community facilities, in foster homes.

Del Toro, at the end of his first visit, was a bit shaken. "It's a lot worse than I expected," he said.