

# Commissioner shocked by reports on Willowbrook

By PETER HARRIGAN  
Advance staff writer

ALBANY — State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence Kolb met with Staten Island's Assembly delegation yesterday and, after hearing the legislators describe conditions at Willowbrook Developmental Center, declared the institution "is worse than I thought."

Kolb, who plans to conduct a personal inspection of the sprawling facility sometime next week, made the remark after being told of allegations of inadequate security at Willowbrook and of cases where residents were bathed with cold water and were forced to sleep in cold wards.

Meanwhile, the commissioner said that the new director for the institution should be selected within three weeks, adding that his visit to Willowbrook will include an interview with one of three candidates nominated by a screening committee for the position.

"I would hope to interview these three people within the next two weeks," Kolb said, adding that a final decision is expected about a week after the interviews are completed.

"They're very fine men," he said of the candidates.

Yesterday's 30-minute meeting in Assemblyman Louis DeSalvio's office here was arranged at the request of DeSalvio, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly and Assemblyman Guy Molinari.

Kolb, whose appointment by Gov. Carey still must be confirmed by the State Senate, spent most of the session listening to the three lawmakers and taking notes.

"We want to work with you and we want to do everything we can to help resolve the problems at Willowbrook once and for all," DeSalvio said.

Mrs. Connelly detailed allegations of inadequate staffing of wards during the nighttime, and both she and Molinari expressed concern over inadequate security at the institution. Molinari also gave Kolb a list of seven recommendations, formulated by the Willowbrook Parents Action Committee, to improve conditions at the facility.

Kolb said afterwards that while he has never inspected Willowbrook, he does not believe the institution "will work properly until we've got a good, stable staff from Staten Island."

"What's the reason we can't get good Staten Island people to work in that institution," he asked the legislators, noting that many employees presently reside in New Jersey or in other parts of the city.

Molinari suggested that people are afraid to work at Willowbrook, a problem, he said, that stems from a lack of proper security. He said he has been told of cases in which employees have been physically threatened by other workers, and Mrs. Connelly alleged that some employees take food and other items from the institution.

Kolb admitted there is a security problem at Willowbrook, declaring: "The (Mental Hygiene) department's security force is not geared for this type of thing.

"They can't solve anything, because they probably don't know how," he added.

Mrs. Connelly, who partici-

pated in a surprise inspection of Willowbrook last Friday night, told the commissioner that many windows were open in a ward in one of the buildings she visited, despite low temperatures outside.

"It was cold, but no one had a key to open the screens to take the windows down," she said. Molinari added that at least one building never has enough hot water, apparently due to faulty or outdated heating equipment.

"The parents walked in there one night and the children were being washed with ice water," the freshman legislator stated.

Kolb interrupted at that point and said: "What you're telling me is, it is worse than I thought."

DeSalvio proposed a moratorium on the transfer of any more patients to Willowbrook, as well as on the construction of halfway houses for the retarded, nursing homes and similar facilities on the Island. He said that in addition to generating controversy, such facilities also put a drain on public services.

"We ought to stop these things and take stock and find out whether we can afford to take any more of this stuff onto the Island," he said.

Molinari, meanwhile, asked Kolb to check into the status of a plan by the Department of Mental Hygiene to use a vacant building adjacent to Doctors Hospital on Targee St. in Concord as a residence for some patients now at Willowbrook.

Although the plan apparently has been scrapped, Molinari said that residents in the vi-

cinity of the building — which has been tied to the Bernard Bergman nursing home syndicate — have heard rumors the proposal might be resurrected.

The assemblyman asked Kolb, who indicated no knowledge of the plan, to inform him of any possible developments.

"One of the problems we've had with all state agencies on Staten Island is that they put things in without telling us first," Molinari said.

He also gave Kolb a list of recommendations, drawn up by parents of children at Willowbrook, to improve conditions and parent input into the administration of the institution.

Among the recommendations are beefed-up security; creation of a review board, with membership including parents, to oversee operations at Willowbrook; segregation of the mentally retarded from the mentally ill, and parent and employee participation in future planning for the institution.

While no exact date for Kolb's visit to Willowbrook has been set, he indicated it might be on next Thursday or Friday, so the legislators could accompany him on the inspection tour. Plans for the commissioner to meet with representatives of parents' groups were also discussed.

State Sen. John J. Marchi, who was unable to attend yesterday's session with Kolb because of a Senate debate, was scheduled to meet with the commissioner sometime today.