

Nametags never issued, Willowbrook aides say

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Despite assurances from a deputy director, Willowbrook Developmental Center has not issued identification nameplates or tags to any of its 3,000 residents who often leave the grounds on state-sponsored trips.

Consequently, a 28-year-old severely retarded resident is probably roaming the streets of Manhattan today without identification and with little means of identifying herself.

Marguerite Sass, who was reported missing Saturday afternoon on a Willowbrook outing at Carnegie Hall, had still not been found this morning despite a massive search effort mounted by police, center personnel and her family.

A similar incident took place Dec. 31, but the two missing residents—both without identification—turned up unharmed on New Year's Day in Manhattan hospitals.

Because of the incident, Dr. Ragasamy Natarajan, deputy director for clinical affairs, ordered that all residents be issued some form of identification to avoid another incident.

The identification tags were never issued.

Dr. Natarajan said last night that after the December incident he met with Acting Director James A. Forde and Donald E. Fleming, deputy director for administrative affairs.

Dr. Natarajan recommended at that meeting that all residents be given some form of identification. Fleming said he would investigate, Dr. Natarajan said. "After that I don't know what happened," he said.

Fleming said yesterday that efforts were made by staff personnel to develop identification for residents. But, he said, those efforts were stymied by the Department of Mental Hygiene officials in Albany.



Marguerite Sass

Fleming said that efforts to get nameplates or bracelets, similar to those issued in hospitals, were nixed by Albany. The efforts go against all plans for "normalization" of residents, the officials reportedly contended.

Essentially "normalization" means making the life of a resident of a state institution as close to that of a normal, non-retarded person as possible.

Outings to social and cultural events, placement in community facilities and even the changing of Willowbrook's name from State School to Developmental Center fall into the normalization category.

"Anything visible on a resident is not in line with the normalization process," Joyce Libra, public information officer for Willowbrook, said about the proposed use of name tags.

Dr. Natarajan feels that state officials have "some funny ideas about normalization," adding that millions of people wear medical identifications. He does not feel that name tags represent a denial of the resident's civil rights.

One Willowbrook official, asking not to be identified, said: "You cannot make an abnormal person normal. You

cannot try to be something you are not."

Fleming and Miss Libra said that a revamping of policy for lost residents is under way. Presently there is no written procedure for lost residents.

Fleming said he believed that Miss Sass' clothes had identification markings. Willowbrook, however, presently does not have a garment control procedure and it is probable that her clothing is marked with a Willowbrook Developmental Center (WDC) tag, but has no name.

Willowbrook officials have alerted the Midtown North and South Police Precincts as well as the Bureau of Missing Persons. Miss Sass' brother, William, has contacted the Transit Authority and officials at nearby Central Park.

Last night, Willowbrook had three staff members searching the area around Carnegie Hall.

The Willowbrook Benevolent Society had sponsored an outing for 35 residents to an afternoon performance of the Youth Symphony Orchestra of New York. Before the concert began, a number of residents, who had been bussed to Carnegie, asked to use a bathroom facility.

While the chaperons were sorting out the requests, according to Miss Libra, Miss Sass apparently wandered off. She has not been seen since.