

Willowbrook Center hit by 2nd blackout

By ROBERT MIRALDI

For the second time in three weeks, a break in an underground cable blacked out five buildings housing 500 residents at Willowbrook Developmental Center, causing a substantial loss of heat in at least one ward.

A probable bad splice in a newly constructed cable, it was learned yesterday, wiped out electrical power to the five buildings Saturday, sometime near 9:30 p.m., according to stopped clocks on the building walls.

Willowbrook officials say that nursing log books show the power failure occurred Saturday at midnight.

By 4 p.m. yesterday, however, electricity had been restored to the five buildings, thanks again to the utilization of an emergency civil defense power generator that was brought to Willowbrook at 3 p.m. and installed within an hour.

Willowbrook officials were at a loss to explain the cause of the cable failure. They are sure that the fault lies with, or at least was caused by, a splice in a cable that was repaired last week by the Arc Electrical Construction Co. of Manhattan.

There were no reports of injuries, severe discomfort or loss of basic service to Willowbrook residents. According to attendants on duty in the affected wards yesterday afternoon, blankets were available in the buildings shortly after the blackout.

Early yesterday afternoon, before emergency power was restored, the wards in Buildings 25, 27, 29, 76 and 77 were darkened. Except for one ward in Building 29, all facilities were heated.

A ward in Building 29, how-

ever, had temperatures ranging from 40 to 50 degrees, causing attendants to wear jackets and loudly complain to reporters and parents visiting the buildings.

"I don't mind coming to work in the dark, but I don't like to enter a building that's dark," said one woman attendant, asking not to be identified.

"My kids are freezing in here," she said, pulling a blanket over one severely retarded male child. Other children had pushed blankets off and onto the floor in some cases. The attendant said it was impossible to keep residents covered.

Most residents (there are 45 in the ward) sat with blankets tossed aside, staring blankly toward the ceiling, flies buzzing around their mussed clothing, apparently not noticing the cold temperatures in the room.

Officials explained the lack of heat in the ward: A central blower in the building basement is run by electricity. When it goes out, the officials said, the heat does not circulate through the ward, even though heaters are working.

A similar power failure occurred at Willowbrook Feb. 19 when a 35-year-old cable, providing electricity to the same five buildings, shorted out. Repair work began two weeks ago by Arc Electrical and was completed last Monday.

Willowbrook officials did not know the cost of the week-long repair project, but they did say that Arc had guaranteed the newly installed splice in the cable.

William Zatwarnicki, plant superintendent, said that Arc would be contacted this morning.

Electrical Foreman Edward VanTine, holding the faulty

cable in his hand, said yesterday that he could not speculate as to who was to blame for the power failure.

"Right now," VanTine said, "I wouldn't want to pin the blame on anyone."

The Office of General Services will investigate, VanTine said, and determine if the Arc Construction Co. work was at fault or if the 35-year-old Willowbrook cable that was spliced caused the short-circuit and subsequent power failure.

When questioned about the possibility of another power failure two weeks ago, Zatwarnicki conceded that a blowout at any time was a possibility with the ancient cables.

Attendants in the affected buildings complained about the emergency procedures in the wards, saying that the flashlights hardly provided enough light for morning feedings.

Attendant Willie Swinton said: "We don't know what to do in an emergency. They don't tell us nothing."

Swinton said that when he came to work at 7 a.m. all lights were out. He called Acting Director James A. Forde, but was told that Forde was in Atlanta, Ga.

Because the emergency power generator could only supply power to one building—Building 29—residents were moved from affected Building 27 and into Building 25. The switch of the 125 residents was scheduled to occur today because of renovations slated for Building 27.

The power failure merely forced an early evacuation.