

Willowbrook abuse —brass can't see it

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Donald Fleming, deputy director for institutional administration at Willowbrook Developmental Center: "We intend to investigate the charges to see whether they are fact or fiction."

Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, the parents' organization: "It's all fact...the drunkenness, the unsanitary conditions, the lack of preventive medicine...it's all fact."

Old charges, made by a new source, an Albany newspaper, were the focus of concern yesterday at Willowbrook Developmental Center just as the beleaguered institution is getting up a full head of steam to implement radical changes mandated by the week-old, out-of-court agreement that will dismantle the facility.

Opinion was mixed as to the validity of the Albany Times-Union charges, made in the first two parts of an eight-part series, detailing the problems of what the paper called the "fragmented and leaderless" Department of Mental Hygiene.

A team of three Times-Union reporters apparently visited Willowbrook some time last week and said they found "drunken attendants, wards without supervision, broken windows, unlocked doors and children sitting in pools of urine."

Pinto said that the drunken employe situation was "a fact" and that the top-level officials "know it is a fact."

Pinto said that some employes become intoxicated on the job.

Empty vodka bottles and beer cans, he said, can be seen in waste baskets and on the building floors each morning. "There is very little supervision at night," Pinto added.

The drinking problem was not widespread, he said, but it was enough of a factor "to make it a danger to the children."

Mrs. Genevieve Kamen, vice president of the Benevolent Society, said that "about 10 per cent" of the employes "are the bad ones."

Fleming would not deny the alcohol abuse charges, but Willowbrook officials have long contended that drinking and drug abuse on the almost 3,000-member staff are no more serious than in the general community.

The Times-Union charged that Willowbrook's buildings were unsanitary and unsupervised, spotlighting on its Sunday first page a photograph of a woman Willowbrook resident drinking out of a toilet.

Fleming said he did not know how to respond to that charge. "The place has come a long way," he said. "It has shortcomings...but it's much better than in the past and it's going to get better."

About the buildings Pinto said: "They are unsanitary. There's no doubt about the un-

sanitary conditions. The housekeeping staff leaves around 2 or 3 p.m. At night, some attendants clean up...some don't."

A key finding of the Griffenhagen-Kroeger management consultant firm, hired to analyze problems and propose solutions at Willowbrook, was that the housekeeping staff had no set work schedule.

Building 2, cited by the Times-Union as one of the unsanitary ones, has the highest number of housekeepers at Willowbrook.

The Times-Union series also cited the poor security at Willowbrook, long a fact of life at the institution.

The week-old consent decree recently signed by Federal Court Judge Orrin G. Judd has mandated that "every building shall be kept clean, odorless and insect-free at all times...."

Different aspects of the 29-page consent decree cover each charge made by the Times-Union. The series of articles, however, question whether the decree can ever be implemented. It would "take a revolution to carry it out," the series, written by three reporters and a city editor, said.

Fleming said "we're working like mad" to see that the decree is implemented. Pinto said that it will "take a helluva lot of good will and effort" by the Department of Mental Hygiene to implement the changes prescribed by the court.