

# Willowbrook community chief fired

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The director of community services at Willowbrook Developmental Center, the unit which holds the key to the future of the troubled institution, has been fired for what numerous Willowbrook staffers have called "incompetency."

Today will mark the last day on the Willowbrook payroll for Mrs. Priscilla Sarino, who was appointed director of community services Feb. 2. To the surprise of many of her staff members, however, Mrs. Sarino disappeared unexpectedly from the sprawling campus late last week.

Willowbrook officials said last night that Mrs. Sarino's departure was known for about a month, but "part of her problem was communication," said Donald Fleming, deputy director, and Mrs. Sarino had failed to inform her staff.

Her three-month tenure was marked, according to numerous sources at Willowbrook, by public relations blunders, staff and administration alienation and a virtual standstill for the community placement program.

"I just think she was in over her head," one community service unit staff member said.

Already demoralized by the apparent lack of guidance from Mrs. Sarino, the Willowbrook community services unit was further set back last week when a memorandum from director Harold Piepenbrink halved the size of the once 30-member staff.

Because of that unexpected breakup of the unit and the shifting of numerous community service personnel to other Department of Mental Hygiene developmental centers, a class action grievance suit has been filed with Willowbrook union representatives.

The workers claim they were not given proper notification.

Also fired in the present shuffle was John Logston, a deputy director for Willowbrook's Brooklyn unit.

Fleming explained last night that the reason for the breakup of the unit was to transfer staffers to other areas where they could aid in placement of Willowbrook residents in other boroughs in which they formerly resided.

"Frankly, we don't know what is going on here," said one staff member yesterday, asking not to be identified because of fear of "getting in trouble."

"There is no justification for breaking up this unit," said Robert Parsons, a three-year employe, a community mental health nurse, until the breakup when, he says, his title was taken away. Parsons is still a member of the now 15-member community services unit.

Parsons said that the breakup "badly hurts" the community placement program and has severed working relationships that staff workers had developed with foster homes.

"There is no way that residents on family care can get adequate follow-up service," Parsons said, referring to the approximate 225 residents now living in foster homes on Staten Island. He estimates that there are an additional 40 or 50 residents in Island nursing homes.

Fleming disagreed with staff members who said that Mrs. Sarino was fired for incompetency. "That word was never used," he said. "She was asked to resign because she had a problem communicating."

When Willowbrook was at peak capacity—some 6,000 residents three years ago—the state Department of Mental

Hygiene began what it termed "Operation Exodus," the shuffling of Willowbrook residents to other institution to reduce the unwieldy size.

Most observers have generally agreed that the operation was a success, at least in terms of numbers. Headed by Albert Robidoux, now at Wilton (N.Y.) Developmental Center, the community services unit had at one time almost 45 staffers.

That figure was reduced to approximately 30 as of last week—until Piepenbrink's order to halve that figure and disperse the staff. The decision comes at a time when most observers feel that community placement will be the key to Willowbrook's future.

A week-old out-of-court agreement, signed last week by a federal court judge, has mandated that the 3,000-resident institution be reduced to 250 residents by 1981.

When Mrs. Sarino was given the community service director's job, succeeding Robidoux, she refused to discuss the appointment with the Advance.

In a conversation yesterday, Robidoux said that he had not recommended Mrs. Sarino for the job, but had suggested that a present member of the Willowbrook staff, familiar with the other staffers, the community and the residents, should be given the job.

Mrs. Sarino was formerly chief of service at Brooklyn Developmental Center.

Some Willowbrook insiders feel that now, with the present number of staff members, it will be impossible to finish the job of community placement which, according to the court agreement, includes the placement of 200 residents in the next 12 months.

Fleming said that one of the reasons for breaking up the community services unit was that the 30-member staff was too large. "It was impossible to figure out who was responsible for putting people in other boroughs," he said.

Staff members adamantly disagree. "Of all the units to jump on," said another community service staffer, asking not to be named, "they jump on us. We still have a job to do."

"They cut the staff in half. How can you do the job?"

The staff members interviewed said that eight of the approximately 75 persons transferred had a total of about 140 cases which will have to be redistributed. The unit cannot handle it, they feel.

The firing of Mrs. Sarino and the breakup of the community services unit comes on the heels of charges made by a team of three reporters from the Albany Times-Union about numerous drunken employes, dirty and littered buildings, broken windows, poor security and poor medical coverage at Willowbrook.

Administration officials have not denied the charges, but have promised to investigate to determine, as Fleming said, if the charges are "fact or fiction."