

State official raps mental health brass for head-in-sand attitude

By ROBERT VICTOR

A public and private debate between the city and the state flared yesterday during and after state hearings in St. George to receive local views on the budget needs of Staten Island mental health and retardation service agencies.

The session was ostensibly a forum for local voluntary agencies seeking state aid to air their needs to city and state officials who will be drawing up the state's mental hygiene budget for 1975-76.

It turned out to be a mini-public debate between the regional director of the state Department of Mental Hygiene and an aide to the commissioner of the city Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services.

Dr. Stuart L. Keill of the state agency, who admitted to being "testy" during the hearings, and Dr. Robert Daley, an aide to the city's Dr. June J. Christmas, battled verbally—almost angrily—in the auditorium of the St. George Library after nine Island agency spokesmen had detailed their needs.

The small auditorium had emptied at 3:50 p.m. and Dr. Keill, his face turning red, pointedly told Daley to inform Dr. Christmas that the city's presentation at the Staten Island public hearing was wholly inadequate, that the city should have readied a list of existing services with projected cuts in mind.

"We have not made those cuts yet," Dr. Daley said, standing in front of a lectern on which Dr. Keill was leaning.

"Then that is irresponsible," Keill shot back.

Daley demurred and turned to leave. "C'mon," Keill said, disgustedly.

"Dr. Christmas has known since September that cuts were inevitable," Keill said later. "Her statement," he said, alluding to a three-page statement which Dr. Daley had delivered for Dr. Christmas, "makes it sound like she suddenly discovered the cuts."

"The people here today did not hear the plan the city has for delivering services," Dr. Keill said, adding that there has never been more than \$60 million anticipated in the state budget and that Dr. Christmas "knows that."

Nevertheless, Dr. Keill said, Dr. Christmas' office insisted yesterday on discussing aid to Staten Island agencies as if there would be \$78 million available, which is the figure that was apparently originally bandied about.

Dr. Christmas' statement had attacked the state for an "inequitable allocation of funds to localities and an unconscionable disregard for the impending effects it will have on mental hygiene services."

Dr. Keill scoffed at Dr. Christmas' use of the word "unconscionable," and produced a letter he had written April 2 which informed the city to limit its basic plan for total expenditures "up to an estimated \$60 million."

"I hope," Dr. Keill's letter added, that upcoming community meetings "will not result in the stimulation of unrealistic expectations by the community..."

Yesterday's public hearing revealed two common denominators among Staten Island mental health service providers: Existing programs must not be cut and local providers do not, as Dr. Keill wished, want to decide which programs may have eventually to be cut.

Dr. Keill agreed after the hearing that any cuts in existing programs would be "disastrous" for Staten Island since, he agreed, existing programs provide the bare minimum.

Dr. Keill also said that total overall mental hygiene budget figures for 1974-75, when broken down, reveal that Staten Island received \$4.8 million or \$16.27 per person. Manhattan received \$62 million or \$44.90 per person, a figure which he conceded was "grossly unfair."

While Keill was attacking the "unfair aspects" of budget appropriations, Staten Island speakers were questioning the sanity of city and state mental health administrators.

"Is it sane to provide profits to proprietary home operators while cutting budgets to voluntary and public mental health providers," said Myron B. Unger, the health, education and welfare adviser to the Staten Island Children's Community Mental Health and Retardation Services.

"Is it sane to talk about needs in the face of what is presented to us as reality?" he asked.

Unger said that attempted and threatened suicides among Island youth had increased more in the past year than in the last 10 years.

"Anything less than a 50 percent increase in budget is the equivalent of child neglect," Unger said.

The chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disability Council, Mrs. Beatrice Victor, pleaded for the rights of the develop-

mentally disabled. "Those rights," she said, "must not be taken away during times when money is somehow found for extravagant gifts to foreign dignitaries."

"We will not be told at a time of financial crisis our needs do not count," Mrs. Victor said, echoing pleas by other speakers.

The other speakers included Mrs. Roberta Imre, Staten Island Mental Health Council; Dr. Lawrence Miller, director of North Richmond Community Mental Health Center; Dr. Bertram New, director, Staten Island Children's Community Mental Health Center; Mrs. Joan Hodum, executive director, Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children; Dr. Gerald Spielman, director, Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Center, and Murray Hecht, director of alcohol services for North Richmond.

Paul Cooper, regional director for Staten Island and Brooklyn for the city department, also spoke.