

Willowbrook unit chief is rehired after mixup

By REGINALD PATRICK

The Willowbrook Developmental Center, correcting a personnel department bungle, has been forced to rehire a former unit chief fired last spring for alleged administrative incompetence, the Advance has learned.

Mrs. Priscilla Sarino, at one time chief of the now dispersed Community Service Unit, reportedly returned to work June 30, receiving back pay to May 7, the official date of her termination.

She is currently training for an assignment as a unit chief with the center's Brooklyn program for in-residents.

One social worker who had been associated with the old Community Service Unit during Mrs. Sarino's tenure as chief said, "The administration wanted to get rid of her for good, but they goofed up."

Demetrius Bumbrey, director of manpower management, called it "simply a misunderstanding and a mistake." According to Bumbrey, the personnel department, for reasons not entirely clear, was not sure of the probationary status of Mrs. Sarino, former chief of service at the Brooklyn Developmental Center before coming to Willowbrook.

Bumbrey said he made the mistake of treating Mrs. Sarino's case as a "routine transfer in," and thus entitled to a three-month probationary period. This despite the fact that she had not received a leave of absence from the director of the Brooklyn center, the normal prerequisite for such probationary status.

Mrs. Sarino's probation should have run the unusual eight to 26 weeks, Bumbrey said. Under civil service regulations, at the end of seven weeks the administration was required to notify her that the trial period would extend the

full 26 weeks. However, according to Bumbrey, since "everybody was thinking in terms of three months" no such notification was ever sent out, and her probation automatically lapsed at the end of eight weeks.

Willowbrook director Harold Piepenbrink summarily fired her, believing he was still dealing with a probationary worker.

Bumbrey said the state Department of Mental Hygiene's personnel office in Albany called Willowbrook June 27 regarding the procedural error. He said he was not sure if the call was made at the behest of Mrs. Sarino or was the result of the state's examination of her personnel file.

He claimed Albany had originally told him to handle her case as a three-month probation.

"I called them," he said, "because I had never dealt with the personnel file on such a high level employee."

Piepenbrink said Mrs. Sarino's new position at Willowbrook will not involve "the actual direct placement of individuals in the community"—work she formerly performed as a unit chief with community service.

"And we're going to help her in all ways possible to be a good administrator," he said.

Piepenbrink said there were "several reasons" for letting Mrs. Sarino go last spring, but would not reveal any of them.

"I felt her termination at that time was in the best interest of the institution," he said, "but I will not publicly discuss those reasons."

He claimed the firing "had nothing to do with complaints from her subordinates," although an Advance article in May reported a hotbed of discontent among the 15 social workers in Mrs. Sarino's charge.

According to sources, her tenure from February to May was characterized by public relations blunders and staff and administration "alien-

ation." They said the community placement program, under her direction, had almost come to a standstill.

Willowbrook's deputy director, Donald Fleming, said "part of her problem had been communication."

Reached for comment, Mrs. Sarino released a short typewritten statement that read in part:

"In view of the distorted and unfounded article that carried no official sanction published by the Staten Island Advance and appearing on May 7, 1975, it is in the best public interest of impartial and accurate reporting that the Staten Island Advance should take a redressing stand in eliciting an official and authoritatively documented statement from (the) Willowbrook administration.

"Your article of May 7, 1975, headlined: 'Willowbrook Community Chief Fired,' emphasizing incompetency, among other charges. The official record clearly reflects that the entire Community Service Unit was dismantled and that the position of Chief of Community Service was to have been abolished. This was executed, resulting in my dismissal.

"It was clear that I was illegally dismissed by methods arbitrary, capricious, unreasonable and contrary to law, and I could not be laid off except for misconduct or incompetency pursuant to law. The outcome was that Willowbrook Developmental Center was directed to reinstate previous position with back pay and other benefits..."

A recent check with former members of Mrs. Sarino's staff revealed that, by and large, their opinion of her work has not appreciably changed. One community health nurse called her "an extremely poor administrator and a dictator."

"We use to have staff meetings every week," he said, "which were suppose to be a means of communicating back

and forth—a sounding board. But she never let us have any input into them. If there were any disagreements, she use to jump and yell: 'This is my meeting, it's not your meeting. I'm the chief here.' She thought we were challenging her."

In order to make it appear that staff meetings went smoothly, one social worker said, Mrs. Sarino "would confiscate and edit the minutes."

He said a personnel department representative was invited to one of the meetings "to see if anything could be done about the situation." The representative told staffers that "Mrs. Sarino is in charge and if you don't like it you can leave," he said.

Another staff member said Mrs. Sarino often made "impossible demands," and tried to get social workers to increase their case loads by as much as 50 per cent. He said she sometimes assigned several day projects and demanded that they be done almost immediately.

At times, he said, she was given to "strange behavior" such as having herself locked in her office by her stenographer for several hours.

"She'd tell the stenographer to come back in three hours to let her out," he said. "That's kind of crazy."

The Community Service Unit, responsible for the placement of Willowbrook residents in the community, was decentralized in June. Under a reorganization program, and to facilitate resident transfers out of the facility, the Willowbrook complex is being broken down into sections—each with its own deputy director—housing residents from various parts of the city. Mrs. Sarino will be working with residents from Brooklyn.