

Willowbrook teaching aides learn of decision to ax jobs

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The educational staff at Willowbrook Developmental Center reported back for work Wednesday morning at 8:30; but for 58 teaching assistants, it was a bleak day to end their summer hiatus.

Between early-morning yawns, 38 teaching assistants were informed that someone, somewhere had decided that as of Dec. 31, 1975, their services would no longer be required by the almost 1,000 residents who receive five-day-a-week school training.

"I wish I were someplace else in the world right now," said Mrs. Hanna G. Glasser, educational director, moments before telling the teachers assembled in the center's auditorium that 38 would be out in December and that the rest would not be funded in June.

Yesterday, as the teachers' assistants began circulating petitions to save their jobs, the school's teachers and a series of administrators reacted with outrage, anger, discouragement and despair.

The despair, for the most part, was for Willowbrook residents who, they feel, will lose out with the cutback of the teaching assistants, a majority of whom are qualified to hold teaching posts but, with the tight teaching market, have had to settle for assistantships.

The teachers, in interviews with the Advance, all agreed that it would be virtually impossible to manage in the classroom without the assistants who, they say, do some of their work and at times take the teachers' place.

"It's the same old story," said one teacher, asking not to be identified, "the kids get the short end again."

The teachers reacted with anger to suggestions made at some administrative levels that attendants, who do not need high school diplomas, would take the assistants' place in the classroom.

"If you bring in the attendants you may as well throw out the educational objectives," one teacher said.

The teachers feel that educators and attendants work at cross-purposes. The teachers want to motivate, inspire and arouse the curiosity of the center's retarded residents. "The teachers' assistants prod the kids to explore," one teacher said.

The attendants, the educators feel, want the residents as sedate as possible so that life on the ward, essentially, is as lifeless as possible. The exposes of dehumanization at Willowbrook have centered around the wards, they feel, where the attendants have the daily feeding and bathing responsibilities.

The teachers admit that the attendants' job is a thankless one and that it is only logical that they wouldn't want residents to be hyperactive all night long. But, they say, in the classroom, the residents have to be pushed to activity.

A spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene in Albany said yesterday that the decision to cut back the teaching assistants was made by Willowbrook director Harold C. Piepenbrink, based on cuts in federal funds to Willowbrook.

A source who spoke with Piepenbrink yesterday, however, said that the director's decision was based on his belief, or at least his questioning, of the capability of the severely retarded Willowbrook

resident to be taught in the classroom.

The spokesman in Albany conceded that Piepenbrink was reevaluating the center's entire educational approach. The spokesman said he "was willing to rehire the fired teaching assistants" if and when he decides their positions are of value.

The federal court-sanctioned consent decree, which regulates changes mandated for Willowbrook, states:

"...Retarded persons, regardless of the degree of handicapping conditions, are capable of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social growth, and upon the further recognition that a certain level of affirmative intervention and programming is necessary if that capacity for growth and development is to be preserved and regression prevented."

The 41-page consent decree further states: "The education policy shall be that all residents are presumed to be capable of benefitting from education...No resident shall be presumed to be incapable of educational development."

"There shall be provided sufficient teachers' aides, therapy aides and other assistants to achieve an average of one such aide or assistant for each teacher..."

One source said yesterday that Piepenbrink's aim of utilizing attendants was because he wanted full-time, 12-month employees. The teachers and their assistants work only 10 months with a two-month summer vacation.

Many of the teachers' assistants worked this summer, some without pay, they claim.

Presently, there are 56 teachers' aides on the 175-member educational staff, which is headed by Mrs.

Glasser, educational director since 1952. The aides must have two years of college credits. Most have at least college degrees and receive \$9,000 to \$10,000 salaries.

In fiscal year 1975, according to the Department of Mental Hygiene spokesman, Willowbrook received \$607,000 in federal Elementary Secondary Education Act title I funds. That appropriation was cut to \$481,000 for this year.

The spokesman said that department budget people feel Willowbrook received "more than its fair share" of the federal allocations.

The spokesman added that Willowbrook received money based on the amount available to the state (\$3.9 million in 1974) and based on the average daily attendance—939 residents in 1973 and 770 in 1975.

The teachers' assistants have not been able to make civil service teacher lists because the civil service examination has not been given in over a year and will not be given for another three to four months. Even then, however, the aides would be on the bottom of a long teacher list.