

Patient's Death Rocks Willowbrook Anew

BY MARY ENGELS

A Willowbrook resident disappeared Christmas Eve and critics say no intensive search for him was made. His body was found four days later in the nearby woods and once again public attention is focused on the giant Staten Island institution for the retarded.

Four employees have been suspended by Dr. Stanley Slawinski, acting director, pending Willowbrook public hearings to start Feb. 13 in response to arguments from parents of residents as well as the community.

Hearing at College

Assemblyman Elizabeth Connelly (D-Staten Island), who heads an Assembly task force studying ways to reorganize the State Department of Mental Hygiene, said in scheduling the hearings that she "has the power of subpoena and I intend to use it."

The Feb. 13 hearing will be held at Staten Island Community College at 4 p.m. and will focus on the circumstances surrounding the death of Luis Ramirez, 20, the resident who disappeared Christmas Eve.

"Judging from interviews I have conducted at Willowbrook recently, I am afraid this could happen again," said Mrs. Connelly.

She also plans to touch on the "quality of care at the center in the wake of last year's federal consent judgment." That a ruling ordered the Department of Mental Hygiene to upgrade service and improve staffing at Willowbrook.

In addition, the legislator plans to probe a union charge that Slawinski, during his investigation of the death of Ramirez, accused only rank-and-file employees of negligence while ignoring the role of higher ranking personnel.

Officials of the Civil Service Employees Association at the center have charged that "administrators of the institution are engaged in a whitewash of the top brass in the unfortunate occurrence resulting in the death of a resident."

Ronnie Smith, president of the Willowbrook CSEA chapter, said that the wrong employees have been suspended.

Smith maintains that the suspended employees took appropriate action on the day Ramirez was reported

missing by notifying the institution's security guard, the grounds supervisor, the local police precinct and the parents by telegram. Further, Smith noted that the employees had recorded in the log book that Ramirez was missing and, therefore, Slawinski, who was the chief administrator on call Dec. 24, should have made himself aware of the missing resident.

Slawinski, on the other hand, said that he had called the center Building 5, on Christmas Eve and asked if anything was awry. "I spoke to both the grounds supervisor and the telephone operator and received a reply from both that 'everything was all right.'"

"I called the next day and got the same answer," declared the official.

"You know" he said in his office the other day, "there are a number of charges, not only from within the center but from the outside, saying I went after the small fish."

Cites Communication Failure

"In a large community the size of Willowbrook, how can I ever know something is happening if I am not told about it. These people should be my fingers, arms, legs — and make me aware of just what is going on," he said.

"The four employees were suspended after an administrative investigation. They will have their internal hearings under the Civil Service rules and procedures as well as the one called by our legislator."

Commenting on the latter, Slawinski said: "It seems to me that legislators become aware of major problems seasonally. Willowbrook has no season. They can assist us and we welcome that, but at all times—not in reaction, to something like this, I have asked them to look into and review the Civil Service laws and procedures in an effort to help administrators within all institutions.

"We have also asked the various legislators to make it clear that Willowbrook is willing to cooperate with them at any time. And, above all, said Slawinski, "we have asked them to put emphasis on the positive things that have occurred at Willowbrook. Many of the efforts of the staff here go unheralded. Only the mistakes make news," he asserted.

Slawinski noted that slightly more than three years ago Willowbrook's population was close to

5,000. "Now it is under 2,700 and the staff is approximately 3,800," he said.

Under the recent court decree, it was mandated that by 1981 the resident population must be no more than 250 residents, the aim being to eventually close down big institutions and bring the mentally retarded population onto more normal settings. The center is attempting to implement this with halfway houses and hostels, as well as family care programs for the residents.

As to Willowbrook's current problems, Slawinski said: "We can have the best technology in the world, the best policies and procedures, but when the human element comes into play anything can happen."

"Part of our staff training and development at the center concentrates on the human element. People must like their jobs. Unfortunately at Willowbrook, that has been lacking in certain areas."

Among the positive things he cited were the reorganization of management designed to establish a more viable administration in Willowbrook; a training program preparing residents for hostel living with the first hostel soon to be opened at Tysen St. in New Brighton; the hiring of 69 housekeepers, bringing the total to 296 at the center, and the addition of 12 employees to the teaching staff.

Reinstated for Schooling

Also a number of residents who had been dropped from the school program are being reinstated. Both that move and the increased staffing were ordered in the court decree.

The dropping of students was done on the grounds that the residents were making too little progress or were over 21, the age when federal education funds are cut off.

"Presently we are reviewing all residents who are in a partial educational program to see if they should be in a full-time one," Slawinski said.