



Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, foreground, listens as Dr. Stanley Slawinski, deputy director at Willowbrook, testifies about the death of Louis Ramirez.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

Hearing into mental patient's death sparks few questions, fewer answers

By ROBERT MIRALDI

A State Assembly mental health committee heard over three hours of testimony yesterday, but little new evidence emerged about the death of 20-year-old Luis Ramirez, the Willowbrook Developmental Center resident found Dec. 29 frozen on the grounds.

The hearing had been convened by Staten Island Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, who said the committee didn't want a "trial" but wanted to bring out the facts about the death of Ramirez, who wandered away from Wil-

lowbrook on Christmas Eve and was not looked for until five days later.

About 100 spectators and 13 witnesses gathered in the Staten Island Community College auditorium to hear Willowbrook officials explain how Ramirez could have been missing for five days before top-level officials became aware of his disappearance.

"There should be some squirming administrators up there," said one Island mental health official before the hearing.

There was little squirming,

however, and few tough questions put to Dr. Stanley Slawinski, acting director when Ramirez died, or to Dr. Alvin Mesnikoff, regional director for the State Department of Mental Hygiene.

"We all feel that Willowbrook needs a boost and doesn't need a further bad name," Mrs. Connelly said at one point in the hearing.

Last night the Island Democrat said she was "uncomfortable" about yesterday's testimony. Many questions, she said, were not answered. Head on...they skirted

around the issues.

"If you're a chief, you have to take responsibility," she said. "You have to accept the blame."

The death of Ramirez could have been avoided "for a variety of reasons," Mrs. Connelly said, adding that it could happen again and that "fortunes are being put into the Willowbrook staff but that none of it seems to be filtering into the wards."

Yesterday's hearing provided "some good ammunition," Mrs. Connelly said, for the As-

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sembly Committee on Mental Health's next public hearing which is expected to hear testimony from the five employees suspended in the wake of the Ramirez death. No date has been set.

Under questioning, Dr. Slawinski admitted yesterday that "there should have been better procedures" and that "we noticed certain flaws" in the search procedures for missing residents.

But, he insisted, "nothing has been hidden or whitewashed," as union officials have charged, nor, he said, are "there simple solutions to the multi-faceted problems of Willowbrook."

"The human dimension," Slawinski said, "makes possi-

ble abuse of any written policy." The real root of the problem in the Ramirez death, he said, was that the administrator in charge of Willowbrook on each of the five days after Ramirez slipped away was never informed.

"The administrator on call is precisely that—on call," Slawinski said. And on each night Ramirez was missing, Slawinski said, never was the chief administrator notified. On Christmas Eve, in fact, Slawinski said, he called the grounds twice and was never informed about the missing resident.

Ramirez was found Dec. 29 about 100 yards from the center administration building. He was naked from the waist down and died of exposure, the coroner reported.

In response to a question from Mrs. Connelly, Slawinski said, "We have not reached the point where we are getting quality care." Some of the problem, he said, is caused by the quality of the center's 4,200 employees.

"If we were in private industry, there would be no problem cleaning house," he said. "The state system seems to protect certain individuals."

Dr. Mesnikoff, former director of the South Beach Psychiatric Center, agreed with Slawinski and said the state "must find a way of rooting out those who are unsuitable" to work with the retarded. The "rights of employees," he said, "must be balanced with the quality of service."

Mesnikoff said that "millions of dollars poured into Willowbrook will not solve the problem" and he called for "radical change in the system of service" for the retarded.

Mesnikoff advocated "comprehensive care at all turns in the curve," in response to a question from Mrs. Connelly about "open door" policies for the retarded. "We do need secure settings for those who require it," he said. "The open door setting works with proper supervision."

Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, said that with proper supervision Ramirez would never have been allowed to wander from Building 5 and

Ramirez' physician, Cheng, said that Ramirez needed one-to-one care.

To the applause of Willowbrook employees in the audience, representatives of the Civil Service Employees Association charged that Willowbrook's administration was "engaged in a whitewash" in the death of Ramirez and has "put the blame on the backs of the low-level employees."

The five suspended employees (an attendant, a security guard, two nurses and two therapy aides) acted properly, said Randolph Jacobs, public information officer for the union. "It is beyond belief that the chiefs of service were not aware," he said.