

Arthur Kill guards shift to Willowbrook

By JOHN E. HURLEY

Fifteen of Willowbrook Developmental Center's 17 safety officers will be fired by early next month and replaced by laid-off narcotics correction officers unless an upstate Supreme Court judge overturns the order directing the move.

The Willowbrook safety officers, who are responsible for both law enforcement and fire protection on the grounds of the institution, are among 200 safety officers statewide whose jobs will be terminated by June 2 under state civil service "bumping" regulations.

Although many of the officers have been employed at Department of Mental Hygiene psychiatric and developmental centers for several years, their status as "provisionals" leaves them open to bumping by laid-off state employees with permanent status—such as the approximately 400 narcotics correction officers fired when the Office of Drug Abuse Services closed many of its facilities in March.

Seven of the Willowbrook officers will be terminated as of May 19, with the remaining eight officers scheduled to be fired by June 2. They will be replaced by narcotics correction officers, most of whom had been employed at the Arthur Kill Rehabilitation Center in Charleston. The number of safety officers at Willowbrook may eventually reach 28—the quota listed for the institution—but the rehired narcotics officers will be cut from civil service Grade 14 to Grade 9, a difference of about \$2,700 a year at the starting salary level.

Still clouding the issue is a court case pending before Supreme Court Justice William Walsh of Rockland County in which the provisional safety

officers are fighting the layoffs. The attorney representing the safety officers, Harold Grune of Stony Point, N.Y., last week obtained a stay order holding off state efforts to release five provisional safety officers assigned to the Letchworth Psychiatric Center in Rockland County. On Friday, Grune presented arguments to have the stay expanded to cover all provisional safety officers who could be fired. Judge Walsh has reserved decision on the matter.

The provisional safety officers argue that the state civil service law requires that all provisional civil servants be considered for permanent status after a period of nine months on the job. (All of the Willowbrook safety officers have at least 18 months on the job.) The provisionals also contend that a civil service exam they passed in March 1975 should certify their permanent job status.

Although the court case is still pending, former narcotics officers on the civil service preferred list are already being hired and safety officers fired at psychiatric centers and developmental centers across the state. Several former Arthur Kill officers are already on the job at Willowbrook.

"I'm a little surprised that the department (civil service) is bullheading this through in the face of this pending lawsuit," attorney Grune said yesterday.

Aside from the legalities of the situation, the provisional safety officers contend that the narcotics officers lack the proper training for work in Willowbrook-type institutions. "It takes at least six months to learn this job," officer Norman Johansen said, "and it will take at least a year and a half to train these men."

Johansen, who received his May 19 termination notice last Friday, noted that institution safety officers receive fire-fighting training at the New York State Fire Academy and law enforcement training from New York State troopers.

Acting Willowbrook director Thomas Coughlin, contacted yesterday in Albany, conceded that there may be some problems initially with the changeover. "Safety officers, whether institution officers or drug abuse correction officers, all have the same basic training. The difference is that when one is sent to an institution such as Willowbrook, he picks up a feel for working with the retarded. They're sensitive to the needs and problems of the mentally retarded and that only comes with experience," Coughlin said.

Coughlin added that a training program for the narcotics officers is currently being prepared and will be similar to a program he had used for police trainees in the Police Academy.

A spokesman for the state Department of Civil Service conceded yesterday that "there are often inequities in the bumping procedure," but he said the provisional safety officers' layoffs "came automatically as a result of the preferred list."