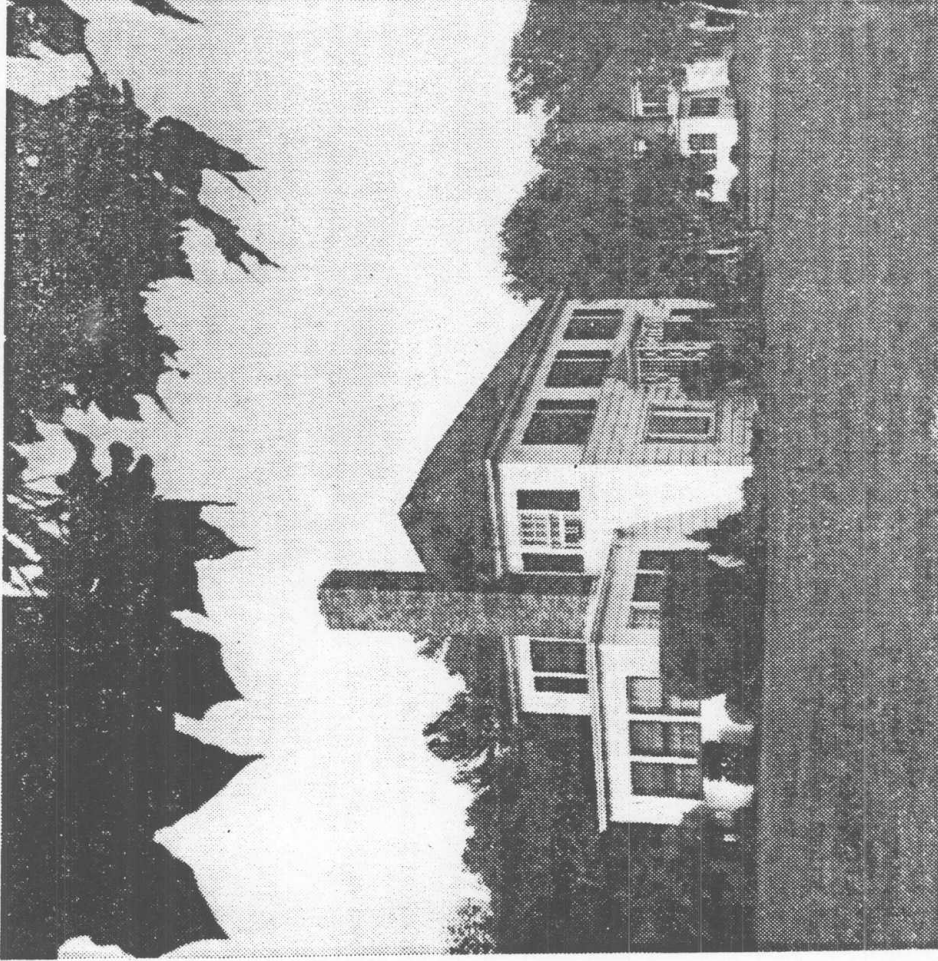


Willowbrook MD: Rent plan jeopardies patients



There are five houses like this one on the grounds of Willowbrook Developmental Center, where the state is moving to triple the rent that workers pay to live in the state-owned homes.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

By ROBERT MIRALDI

A directive from the state legislature to the Department of Mental Hygiene will probably cause the tripling of rents for state workers who reside on the grounds of the Willowbrook Developmental Center.

About 100 workers, including 13 physicians, may be forced off the grounds when the new rental scheme goes into effect—probably Tuesday—and some doctors are charging that the safety of residents is being endangered by the move.

Dr. Rangasamy Natarajan, Willowbrook's deputy director for clinical matters, feels that the directive which might force doctors off the grounds will put Willowbrook in contempt of a federal court.

Dr. Natarajan claims that in testimony before U.S. District Court Judge Orrin G. Judd he promised the judge that the doctors would stay on the grounds for emergency service to residents. "There will be a lot of problems with this rule," said Dr. Natarajan.

"This is a matter of life and death," says Dr. Natarajan, who has been the top medical man at Willowbrook since 1972.

"At the same time that the department wants to get more doctors," Dr. Natarajan said, "they are cutting out an important fringe benefit."

A spokesman for the De-

partment of Mental Hygiene says that the move to triple rents comes at the request of the Legislature, which told Gov. Carey that workers living on state developmental and psychiatric center grounds should pay rents in line with the fair market value.

The savings to the state, the legislature felt, would amount to \$1.5 million. The total department budget amounts to about \$913 million, one-tenth of the total state budget.

Along with the rental hike, the Legislature told the governor to cut out free meals for employees, chauffeurs for directors, and an increased work-week for physicians, all of which would save \$3.2 million.

The new rental scheme being devised by the state Bureau of the Budget calls for a room to be rented for \$60 if it is in "excellent" condition. A "good" room would rent for \$49.

For some doctors, says Dr. Natarajan, the monthly rent will exceed their paychecks. Natarajan, who lives in a house on the Forest Hill Rd. portion of the 387-acre grounds, pays about \$200 now. His rent will be raised to \$500.

Dr. Natarajan claims that doctors, who receive between \$28,000 and \$35,000 yearly salary, could make more money in private practice and that the

fringe benefit of low rent is an inducement to stay at Willowbrook.

Moreover, Dr. Natarajan feels that at least one third of the 40 staff doctors should be living on the grounds for an emergency situation. Especially, he says, during feeding time there is a special need for doctors because of choking conditions that many of the 2,623 residents suffer from.

One doctor living on the grounds says that two years ago he was called from his house during dinner time and rushed over to a building to save the life of a choking resident. "The boy would have died," the doctor said yesterday.

"If physicians are spread out all over the community we won't be able to round them up," said Dr. Natarajan.

Presently there are 40 doctors on the grounds during the day and two doctors remain on call in buildings during the evening and early-morning hours.

The workers who live on the grounds have retained an attorney and say they intend to go to court to keep the low-rent housing setup, claiming the new setup violates their contracts.