

Recently shifted psychiatric patients disrupting Willowbrook

By ROBERT MIRALDI

When Willowbrook Developmental Center resident Kathleen Devine was assaulted Sunday, necessitating stitches, a problem which has been threatening the center for almost six months became a reality.

Sources at the troubled center for the retarded reported yesterday that the assault on Miss Devine, a 20-year-old, long-time resident, was committed by a former resident of the center's psychiatric unit.

The psychiatric unit was disbanded by the Willowbrook administration at the end of April in a move that Dr. James Clements, chairman of the Willowbrook Review Panel, called "precipitous, poorly planned (and) essentially disastrous."

Approximately 60 residents who were housed in behavior modification and psychiatric units were dispersed, after an order from Director Thomas A. Coughlin, into other buildings at the 387-acre center.

But, according to testimony offered May 7 in U.S. District Court and based on interviews with Willowbrook employees, the dispersal move was done with virtually no planning or preparation. Residents of the psychiatric unit, placed there because of severe emotional problems and disruptive behavior, were placed in wards with other less disturbed residents.

"It was disruptive, no doubt," Coughlin told Judge Orrin G. Judd on May 7 about the dispersal, "but no one was hurt."

Sunday, however, Miss Devine was reportedly struck on the head by a shoe, and the pitfalls of dispersing psychiatric unit residents became evident. "It's an impossible situation," Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents' group, said when contacted yesterday.

"You just cannot put those residents together with the others," Pinto said, advocating another special ward for disruptive residents.

The Willowbrook administration sees it differently, however.

Coughlin was in Chicago yesterday and not available for comment. Acting Director Sherman McKoy explained that the administration feels the former psychiatric unit residents can be successfully integrated, as long as proper staff and programs follow into the buildings.

McKoy said that about 12 to 14 residents are presently living in Building 33, a former residence for staffers, in apartment-like complexes.

The other psychiatric unit residents have been dispersed to numerous buildings and, McKoy admits, there have been "some problems with staff being reassigned." There is a "need to redeploy staff," McKoy says.

In Building 21, where Miss Devine was assaulted, McKoy says that six trained staffers have been added to the two original new staffers that were assigned there. "We are taking steps to provide the staff," he says.

"You use your best guess for equitable use of the staff. Your best guess is your best guess until you get more information," McKoy says. "We have to assume that with proper staff and programs" the problems will be minimal, he says.

"We've made every effort to insure against another resident being injured," says McKoy, a deputy director whose background is in hospital administration.

Dr. Jennifer Howse, executive director of the Review Panel, says the panel has been seeking a master plan from the state Department of Mental Hygiene for almost a year. Two letters, on May 13 and 26, were sent to Coughlin requesting information on the psychiatric unit dispersal.

Dr. Howse said yesterday that a complete plan, with a list of former unit residents, where they have been sent and what staff and programs are accompanying, still has not been sent to the Review Panel.

Dr. Howse agreed with McKoy's analysis that proper staffing and programs should "minimize disruptive behavior."

She criticized Willowbrook management, however, for not providing proper training for staff and for not preparing a master plan. At the May 7 court hearing, attorney Chris Hanson said:

"The Review Panel does not ask for these plans out of idle curiosity."