

Abuse at Willowbrook — problem lingers like the pain

By ROBERT MIRALDI

For over 25 years the mother has watched her son grow at Willowbrook Developmental Center. She has seen conditions there go from horrible to livable and she prays for the day the center will be top notch.

Faithfully each weekend the mother has visited her retarded son from her home in the Bronx. Recently she moved to the Willowbrook section of Staten Island to be closer to her son and now she takes him home on weekends.

One Saturday afternoon she helped her son into the shower and took a close look at his back — for the first time in 20 years. She saw welts, scars and purple marks running horizontally across that back.

"He was beaten," she says. "Someone had beaten him. God knows how many times." Tears roll down her cheeks — tears of guilt and pain. And she begins to sob uncontrollably.

Today, almost 30 years after the state-run Willowbrook became a home for the retarded and 18 months after the state agreed to make radical improvements there, abuse of the 2,595 residents continues to plague the institution.

Last year there were from 50 to 100 major abuse cases — the highest at any of the state's 20 centers — comprising perhaps 25 per cent of the abuse cases in the state mental hygiene system.

In an average month, there will be about 700 incidents at the center — abuse of residents by employees, abuse of residents by residents, accidental injury, and hundreds of incidents of unknown origin.

The incidents range from the gruesome — one resident bites off another resident's ear — to the trivial — a resident falls in a shower without a mat and cuts a leg.

But the abuses and the incidents are increasingly alarming parents and others, upsetting the center's myriad watchdog panels, precipitating memoranda from state officials and caus-

ing an Island assemblyman to demand an investigation.

Like most problems at Willowbrook, there are no easy solutions, no easy scapegoats, and little hope that an end to the abuse problem will come quickly.

Director Dr. Levester Cannon does not consider patient abuse "a major problem." He says it is "no greater now than at any other period." In fact, he says, it is his "impression" that the numbers have gone down.

Cannon blames continued overcrowding and the "wrong mix" of residents for the abuse cases. But, he concedes, "we still have employees who abuse" the residents. Cannon says Willowbrook is attempting to zero in on the abusers.

South Shore Assemblyman Guy V. Molinari, in an Oct. 16 letter to State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb, charged that the state "has failed miserably in (its) assigned role to protect the Willowbrook residents."

Molinari, who said he released the letter only after he received no reply from Kolb, claims that "the incidents of maltreatment of the residents seem to be on the rise." Cannon's answer: "That's not true."

Molinari said he has been told that over a three-week period a dozen residents "suffered from bone fractures as a result of beatings either by employees or, in some cases, by other residents while the employees stand idly by or do not intervene."

An Advance investigation could not substantiate Molinari's charge. What state records and interviews with those familiar with Willowbrook's operation seem to indicate, however, is that:

Each month an average of three residents are the victims of serious physical abuse. In October, for example, a 23-year-old severely retarded female resident was sodomized by a 33-year-old ex-employee who was on the grounds to pick up his girlfriend. He was arrested by police.

Each month two or three residents are the victims of serious physical

abuse of either unknown, or unprovable, origin. For example, in July a 27-year-old resident suffered a fractured jaw. A state probe could not determine "how, when or where the injury occurred."

¶ Despite daily body checks and new detailed policies on reporting, incidents of abuse continually fail to be reported, allegedly because some employes are covering up for others. There are indications that some employes are threatening the lives of fellow workers in an effort to maintain the coverup.

Says Molinari: "In some cases, employes have reported incidents of maltreatment of the residents by other employes. However, the result is that the good employe is then threatened, harassed and even physically beaten.

"It may seem hard to believe but the very life of an employe is put on the line when they make a complaint against another employe. An atmosphere of fear pervades the institution.

"It is not a pretty picture," Molinari states.

The Advance has interviewed a dozen employes, all requesting anonymity, who claim to have been threatened. One woman, a nurse, has had her car fire-bombed, her tires slashed and dead animals placed at the doorstep of the building where she works. She continues in her job at Willowbrook, however.

¶ Numerous factors, especially the unreliability and questionable legal value of testimony by retarded residents, make it difficult to prosecute alleged abusers. For example, one state study shows that over a 30-month period 594 persons were charged with patient abuse, but only 115 were fired from their jobs.

Moreover, detectives who are called to Willowbrook to probe abuse charges are often met by unreliable victims and untalkative employes — and, according to numerous sources, the detectives often seem disinterested in the plight of the retarded.

¶ Finally, it seems clear, state officials are often faced with surreal, Catch-22 circumstances when they attempt to halt abuse.

Example: A resident who was nine months pregnant was thought to be in labor. She was taken to a hospital, but was returned shortly to Willowbrook when it turned out she was in false labor. Back at Willowbrook, however, she began "acting crazy," one report notes, "ripping up offices" and hitting other residents.

The catch: Because she was pregnant, doctors feared sedation which might harm her child and regulations prohibit tying up a resident. Moreover, St. Vincent's Medical Center's psychiatric ward refused to admit a nine-month pregnant psychotic woman.

"There was no real solution on how to handle her," one doctor said. Meanwhile, she ran virtually wild.

A Nov. 12 memorandum from Deputy State Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin to Director Cannon suggests that Willowbrook appoint an investigator to probe abuse cases. Be preventative, not after the fact, the memo suggests. Cannon says that is his aim.

Molinari has demanded a Department of Mental Hygiene investigation and may soon join an assembly subcommittee on patient abuse in mental hygiene facilities.

In the meantime, abuse of residents at Willowbrook Developmental Center will continue.