

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.