

Our opinion

Costly Willowbrook thievery

Appearing almost daily in the police log of the Advance are listings of theft at Willowbrook Developmental Center, the state-run center where 2,595 retarded persons live. According to the center's director, the thievery is now costing the taxpayer \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year and depriving the center's residents of vital equipment.

Director Dr. Levester Cannon called the thievery "incredible." He is right. With 35 to 40 per cent of the center's goods being stolen, it is incredible. Even more incredible, however, is that police have not stepped in to change the situation.

Police officials and the district attorney have been apprised. Thus far, they have taken no action.

Director Cannon says he has tried to halt the massive theft rate. But, he says, most of it occurs "inside" the institution — presumably by

some of the center's 4,500 employees. Cannon says any institution expects a 15 per cent theft rate, but Willowbrook is not an ordinary institution.

First, to meet court-mandated staff levels, the center is hiring 80 employees a month. Parents with children at the center have long complained that numerous former criminals are on the center payrolls. Better screening is certainly needed.

Second, Cannon has promised to place a guard at the facility's main entrance to check cars leaving the institution at night. How could anyone drive out of Willowbrook with a huge color television set in his car — that has happened — without a guard being aware? A guard at the gate is a must.

Third, Cannon says he will institute daily equipment and clothing checks to determine the shifts and

buildings where material is disappearing. The checks will be time consuming and an annoyance. But they, too, must be done.

Finally, if Willowbrook is losing upwards of \$400,000 a year in stolen goods, what about the other 50 state-run mental health centers? Could the others be much different? How much money is being ripped off from the taxpayers' pocket?

No one knows the answers to those questions. But perhaps it's about time that Charles J. Hynes, the state's special prosecutor for health and social services, be empowered to begin a probe. Or maybe the State Commission on Investigation should snoop around.

Someone has to look at the state-run centers. The taxpayers and centers' residents deserve a better