

Willowbrook shift: Confusion, chaos and rumor



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A ward in Willowbrook Developmental Center's Building 14, where programs were at a standstill yesterday. A privately hired attendant, asked why a little girl sat on the floor naked, said: "Because she just went to the bathroom, and probably left her clothes in there."

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

The long-awaited remedy to some of Willowbrook Developmental Center's lingering ills was born today into an atmosphere of threats, disruption, confusion and, in some circles, despair.

The court-invoked plan to turn over the care of 641 of the state institution's 2,400 retarded residents to the private United Cerebral Palsy Association was set to go forward, despite mounting, last-minute chaos that cast a pall over the unprecedented arrangement.

This morning, on the first day of a worker protest against the UCP takeover of some wards, a tense atmosphere

prevailed at the state institution, with double the normal complement of six state security guards on the grounds. Workers claimed that many wards were understaffed, but Elin Howe, deputy director, refuted that claim. Union leadership was unavailable for comment.

In one incident, UCP officials changed all the locks to the Building 17 kitchens, ostensibly for the protection of equipment. But as a result, a number of children received their breakfast more than an hour late and were fed in their dormitory buildings rather than the central cafeteria.

Signs flashed regularly yesterday, adding up to an unfortuitous beginning.

Concerned parents were on their guard. State officials in Albany expressed anxiety. The palsy group executives prepared "contingency plans."

And resident care suffered.

The events leading up to the UCP takeover of seven of the center's 31 residential buildings were these:

There was a vacuum of leadership at Willowbrook. The outgoing director there, Dr. Levester Cannon, scheduled to quit yesterday, was told to stay

through tomorrow by a deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene. Nevertheless, Cannon was said to