

Willowbrook shift: Confusion, chaos and rumor



PAGE
1
OF
3
PAGE

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

have told a few complaining Willowbrook workers yesterday, "My hands are washed of this place."

¶ Some of the estimated 700 state workers affected in the UCP takeover maintained they had received no new job assignments. Others were in the dark as to when they should report. All were angry, charging "Lady Rumor" prevailed. The state swore that everyone had been redeployed to non-affected buildings, although a precise accounting was unavailable.

¶ More than 100 state workers, mostly from the would-be, UCP-run baby complex, failed to show for work yesterday, opting instead to protest the takeover in Albany. The state said employees whose absence was unsanctioned would be made to account for their whereabouts.

¶ The result of yesterday's demonstration was that many wards of the baby complex were desperately understaffed. Activity in the complex was at a standstill, with UCP-hired therapy aides already on the job claiming they'd been abandoned by state staff.

¶ A five-year-old federally funded deaf-blind program in Building 26, heralded two months ago as "one of the finest in the country," seemed to have fallen victim to the disorganized takeover effort. The program's workers, maintaining they were paid federally, said they, too, received notice of reassignment.

¶ Some of the 240 UCP therapy aides already on staff in the baby complex said they are encountering resistance, and in some cases, threats from state workers displeased over the arrangement.

¶ But state workers, members of the Civil Service Employees Association representing 4,500 Willowbrook workers, argued the UCP employees working in the complex don't know the first thing about care for the retarded, despite six weeks of private training.

Thomas Coughlin, deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene, was due from Albany today to keep an eye on developments at Willowbrook, a spokesman said.

But the spokesman, Cora Hoffmann, answering charges that chaos reigned at the 384-acre institution, commented: "The situation is a little confused, but we feel we have it under control.

"We've taken every precaution," she said, "to comply with the (federal) court order."

She reaffirmed the state's position that no Willowbrook worker will lose his job for the next two years. She said 200 of the 700 affected workers would work under a shared-staffing arrangement

with UCP in three buildings; approximately 100 more had been hired by UCP, thus losing their civil service status, and the remainder had been transferred to other buildings "to enrich programs and make up staffing deficits."

As to the partially federally funded deaf-blind program, aiding 44 youngsters at a cost of nearly \$1 million a year, Mrs. Hoffmann asserted it will stay put, despite the UCP takeover of Building 26, in which the program is operated.

But 15 workers in that program, saying they were hired on federal lines, displayed reassignment slips they received last Thursday, which said simply: "As you were previously notified, you are to be reassigned because of the UCP takeover effective Sept. 23, 1977. Your building assignment is 9."

A federal official for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which monitors the grant, blasted state officials for not informing his office that "changes were even being considered."

"The state," the official, Robert Dantona of HEW said, "must be very careful they're not violating the law of our contract with them. Any changes in this program must be put in writing to this office."

Deaf-blind program workers, confused because their jobs had been taken away, sat idly yesterday. They spoke to Dr. Cannon earlier in the day, and reportedly he told them:

"I'm sick of the parents. I'm sick of everything. There's nothing I can do" except make a recommendation the federal workers remain on their old jobs until private staff is trained to replace them.



A classroom of Building 26's deaf-blind program goes unused because the intended UCP takeover has cast doubts upon its future.

Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

The residents of the deaf-blind program, though, were the most unfortunate victims. Their learning activities and therapy, staff said, had been halted last Wednesday, pending more definite word.

The children, as a result, sat on sparsely staffed ward floors yesterday doing nothing.

One therapy aide hired by UCP was asked if he considered the level of programming low. He answered: "No comment," then explained the situation is "really confusing now because we're not in charge until tomorrow."

Other buildings set for UCP operation were in similar disarray.

Robert Schonhorn, UCP's executive director, explained the 240 therapy aides already on the staff at Willowbrook are confused because private supervisors have not yet reported to work.

"But I guarantee you," he said, "as of

tomorrow the people will be A-1 or they won't be."

Four state workers — two in Building 12, one in 26 and one in 13 — claimed not to have gotten new job assignments.

The state response was that "there might be some isolated cases like that, but on the whole the reassignment process was a carefully thought-out process."

A private professional, who asked to remain anonymous, called the Advance last night to say she'd been at Willowbrook yesterday and feared reporting to work today. Mounting speculation that there'd be a job action, she said, was giving her second thoughts.

"We've voiced our concerns to UCP as a group," she said, "but there's little they can do except take precautions.

"Yes it's a job. But there are lots of other jobs. The most important thing is that you should want to care for the residents."

At a rally on the Capitol steps yesterday, followed by a march to the state mental hygiene agency, the state employees threatened for a second time a "sick-out" or "lock-in" if the takeover is carried out.

The employees accused Gov. Carey of "using a charitable organization to perform the function of state government."

CSEA president William McGowan claimed in a statement that the state had agreed to the arrangement because federal funds could be used to cover much of the cost, estimated by UCP at approximately \$28,000 a year a patient. State care for each resident is about the same cost.

The takeover of seven buildings at the developmental center, including five buildings constituting the baby complex and Buildings 13 and 15, grew out of a March agreement in Brooklyn Federal Court.

It was desired by parents of Willowbrook's retarded, who felt it would be a remedy to some of the problems associated with any institution Willowbrook's size.

Yesterday, Federal Court Judge John Bartels, who approved the state-to-UCP transfer, ordered a hearing on the whole takeover problem at an undisclosed date.