

UCP maintaining order at Willowbrook despite 'sickout'

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State workers called in sick yesterday in larger than normal numbers to protest the first day of a court-invoked takeover of seven of Willowbrook Developmental Center's 31 residential buildings by the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

But the massive chaos that was expected to result from state workers' opposition to the takeover failed to materialize as UCP employees cut short a planned two-day orientation to fill in for absent workers at the seven buildings.

Both state and UCP employees complained of confusion.

Delays of up to one hour were reported in the delivery of meals, some residents received improper diets and questions arose over whether state or UCP officials had authority over the workers.

But considering it was the first day of an unprecedented arrangement, deputy director for administration at Willowbrook Elin Howe said the transition went well.

There was a minimum amount of disruption, she said, for the 641 residents now under UCP care.

Felton King, president of the Willowbrook Chapter of the Civil Service Employees Association, representing 4,500 state workers at the institution, said that a threatened lockout of UCP employees was still being considered by the union leadership.

King said a "militant wing" of the union was attempting to expand the "sickout" to include all of the institution's buildings.

"As far as any action that this union will take, I have no plans to telegraph our plans in advance," King said. "But my statement that we will do everything to block the UCP takeover stands."

Indeed, some Willowbrook administrators attributed the failure of more state workers to call in sick yesterday to the fact that it was payday and employees did not want to delay receipt of their checks.

Despite the threats of more intense union pressure against the takeover, both UCP officials and Willowbrook administrators said they are optimistic they can maintain care for the residents under UCP supervision.

"Everything that could be done has been done," a spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene, Cora Hoffmann, explained. "If anything happens, some on-the-spot decisions will, of course, have to be made but we think we have it under control."

Robert Schonhorn, UCP's executive director, vowed the same, saying: "Anything I have to do to ensure the safety of the residents will be done."

That an unsanctioned sickout was occurring became apparent about 9:45 a.m., 45 minutes after more than 700 UCP employees arrived at Willowbrook for their first day of work.

With 240 additional UCP-hired therapy aides, who have been on staff at Willowbrook for two months, the privately hired staff reported to Building 3's auditorium for the first segment of a two-day orientation.

They were to begin officially their assignments on tomorrow even though other UCP services, including food and maintenance, went into effect yesterday.

But, during introductory addresses by prominent national, state and UCP executives, one official announced that the seven buildings composing the UCP complex were understaffed because state workers had called in sick.

Seventy-two volunteers were recruited immediately to cover the sparsely staffed wards.

Then, about 45 minutes later, orientation was canceled completely as all UCP therapy and support staff was told to report to new jobs at once.

As a result, many of the workers, professional and para-professional both, expressed nervousness, not knowing precisely what to do.

But UCP team leaders and supervisors maintained the situation was under control, though programs and activities for the residents, they said, would probably be at a standstill until better organization was achieved.

Considerably larger numbers of absences among state workers were reported during the afternoon shift, with a supervisor of one baby-complex building saying 50 per cent of assigned state workers had called in sick.

Some threats of harassment and exchanges of words were reported by both state and UCP employees, saying they felt tense and uneasy about the new arrangement.

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