

State refutes union charges in Willowbrook patient's death

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Union charges that a 20-year-old Willowbrook Developmental Center resident died early yesterday as a direct result of the United Cerebral Palsy Associations care have been labeled false and unfounded by the institution's administrators.

A spokesman for the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, Clifton, said yesterday, however, the resident in question, identified as Miss Diane Kilgor, had entered the federal facility Sept. 5, placing her admission three days before the private organization took supervisory control.

Felton King, president of the Willowbrook Chapter, Civil Service Employees Association, which is attempting to thwart the UCP takeover of seven buildings, said the woman resident died after choking to death on a piece of solid food she was incapable of chewing.

King said she died while under the care of UCP in Building 26.

But the spokesman for the Clifton hospital, who placed Miss Kilgor's death about 2 a.m. yesterday, said an autopsy report had not yet been received, and the reason she died not firmly established.

Elin Howe, acting director of the institution, said the 20-year-old resident, who lived in Building 26, had a history of hospitalization, admitted this time after experiencing stomach pain, irregular heart beat and preliminary signs of dehydration.

Miss Kilgor had remained in the hospital since Sept. 5, in serious condition, and had never returned to the Willowbrook grounds, according to Miss Howe.

"At no time," Miss Howe said, "was

the resident receiving UCP treatment. It's very distressing to me that someone would try to capitalize on a death."

King, who's head of a union representing 4,000 state workers at Willowbrook, said he had "not been able to confirm" that the young woman entered the hospital before the state surrendered control of the buildings to UCP.

Another union official added that Miss Kilgor had been reported sick by a UCP-trained therapy aide, on staff at Willowbrook since late July.

"Our investigation shows she received a totally unsuitable food, containing large chunks of bacon, under the care of UCP," King said, adding that to his knowledge the woman had no history of hospitalization.

Many retarded residents of Willowbrook, because they haven't developed the capacity to chew or swallow solid foods, are served a diet consisting of more liquid-type substances.

When UCP came to Willowbrook one week ago, it brought with it a new food service, with diets of more solid substances generally considered highly nutritious.

The private organization maintains that one of its goals will be to teach residents to ingest such foods.

But Miss Howe, ironically, confessed: "There is no indication that points back to the food. But even if there were, then she died of Willowbrook (state) food and not UCP food" because she was admitted to the hospital three days before the UCP food service or supervisory staff arrived.

Willowbrook's CSEA leadership, which Wednesday night received authorization to strike to protest the court-invoked takeover, has charged since the

state surrendered care of 641 of the institution's 2,400 residents that the privately hired staff of UCP is ill-trained to treat the retarded.

The private group, considered by many a giant in the care of multiple handicapped persons, replies that it does have some experience aiding retarded people, too, and cites the Nina Eaton Center in South Beach as an example of the success it has had with an institutionalized population.

King, while saying alleged UCP "incompetence" is a good reason to strike in itself, admits that the workers' primary concern is layoffs, which the union claims will be an inevitable outcome of the takeover.

King was expected yesterday to meet with CSEA officials in Albany to discuss his local's intended job action.

He refused to set a date when public workers would walk off their jobs, but added, "The time is near at hand."

Strikes by public workers are forbidden under the state Taylor Law. Miss Howe said yesterday that the Department of Mental Hygiene had made no decision yet on when to seek a court order attempting to bar the workers from striking.

But King said his membership was resolved to defy any injunction since the state, he claimed, had "already violated the state constitution, the Mental Hygiene Law and our job contract" by agreeing to the UCP takeover.

Under the takeover, beginning its second week of a two-week transition period, an estimated 600 state workers are to be shifted from UCP-controlled buildings to 24 others that are still state run. The reassignment process is due to be completed Sept. 23.