

Threats to bosses not unusual at developmental center

By ROBERT MIRALDI

While police seek new information relating to the murder of a nurse at the Staten Island Developmental Center, parents of the handicapped residents and state officials have pointed to the continuing problem of violence at the state center.

Ever since the center began as the Willowbrook State School, reports of harassment, intimidation and on occasion beatings of supervisors by other employees have surfaced, although center officials say such acts are not by any means rampant.

The murdered nurse, Shin-ae (Emma) Lee, whose body was discovered Sunday, allegedly had been threatened by a former employee of the center who was fired after Mrs. Lee gave the employee a poor work rating.

In a joint statement issued yesterday, Elin M. Howe, director of the center, and Felton King, head of the center's union, called any discussion of incidents between supervisors and other staffers "quite untimely."

"We find it could be construed that these incidents have contributed to Mrs. Lee's death. There has been no substantiation in the police investigation to date of any employee involvement in this incident.

"The supervisor-staff relationship is generally a positive one, with all of us working toward the common goal of providing the best service possible for the retarded.

"We and each staff member (of the center) feel personally maligned by the possible implication" of a discussion of past incidents between supervisors and staff.

Whether or not there is a connection, state officials and parents agreed in interviews this week that harassment of supervisory personnel is a fact of life at the developmental center. The Advance is aware of these incidents:

¶ In 1975, a nurse who worked in a building with severely retarded adults and who had reported on two employees drinking on the job, had her car windows broken, her tires slashed, and in his place on the driveway of the

building where she worked, and had her life threatened.

The woman continued to work at the center as the incidents continued over a six-month period, but last year she left for a job at another center in the Bronx.

¶ Last year, a supervisor in a building housing a workshop for the center's residents turned in an employee, who was later disciplined, and the supervisor in turn was beaten and seriously injured. His arm was broken and he sustained a head injury.

¶ A woman who works in a bookkeeping office at the center reportedly reported a number of questionable vouchers submitted by employees. "She was just making people more accountable," one state official said.

Her actions led to telephone threats and, in one instance, an in-person threat. The woman continues to work at the center, but she, like others interviewed, asked that their names not be used for fear of reprisals.

Two parents, both active in the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, also said they had been threatened for complaining about employees not doing their jobs, one within the last month.

Chris A. Hansen, an attorney who has been involved in the Willowbrook case since it entered federal court in 1972, agreed that the harassment issue has been a problem at the center, which has 4,000 employees and 2,300 residents.

"When we were preparing for the trial in mid-1975," Hansen said, "a big thing was bombing supervisors' cars. We had incidents of weapons being pulled on supervisors, lives being threatened."

At the trial in Brooklyn Federal Courts, during which parents sought radical changes at the center, one witness testified anonymously about her fear of turning in another employee and the threats she had received.

Hansen emphasized that such threats, or even fears of such threats, are an important issue that relate to patient care at the center. "If a supervisor is afraid to report on an employee who is not doing his job, then patient care must indeed suffer."

Hansen, and others interviewed, put some of the blame on the city police and the district attorney, who he said, do not treat such incidents like other criminal cases. "It's just another institution case, they feel," Hansen said.

One high-ranking state mental retardation official concurred, saying that an assault at an upstate institution is treated like any other criminal assault. In New York City, however, the official said, police treat the assaults — of residents and employees — differently.

The official pointed out, however, that a lack of manpower, the difficulty in obtaining testimony from retarded residents and the coverups that apparently take place often in the institution have severely hampered police efforts.

For her part, Miss Howe said yesterday, she has been pleased with police cooperation in any incident that she and her staff have considered serious. "I do not feel they treat the institution differently," she said.

Others disagreed with Miss Howe, however, saying that police do not do enough at the state center and that harassment of supervisors, apparently like Mrs. Lee, is a dangerous problem.