

FBI counting employees on Willowbrook wards

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

FBI agents canvassed the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center this week, taking an employee head-count to see if the institution is meeting minimum court-ordered staffing levels.

Federal sources revealed yesterday that the investigation, conducted on behalf of the U.S. Justice Department, involved checking rates of employee absenteeism and worker-to-resident staffing ratios in five of the Willowbrook center's 31 residential units.

Four federal agents toured the buildings Tuesday, asking supervisors the number of state workers assigned to care for the units' mentally retarded residents. In some cases, workers were asked addresses and telephone numbers of absent employees, the sources said.

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, which administers the Willowbrook institution, apparently was clued in to the agents' visit shortly before they appeared on the grounds, according to the sources.

The results of the FBI survey — reportedly the first such inquiry undertaken by the federal government in about four years — may be used as evidence by a federal judge who has been asked to rule on a motion alleging that state officials have failed to comply with staffing terms of a 1975 court order.

The federal sources said the Justice Department will participate as an observer in a hearing on the staffing motion, which was brought by the parents of center residents. The hearing is scheduled to begin today before Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels.

"The FBI investigation is just a routine attempt to provide Justice with objective information on numbers of staff at Willowbrook," one Justice Department source said. "Our role is pretty minimal. We're just trying to see if New York State is living up to the (1975) con-

sent decree."

The source, indicating the results of the FBI tally may come out in court, added that the federal government has "not decided what we're going to do with the information in the long run."

Justice's Office of Civil Rights participates as a friend of the court in the ongoing, six-year court battle to reform conditions at the Willowbrook facility, once called a "snakepit" by the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy but now considered largely improved.

The federal government also provides the state institution with millions of dollars in aid a year and could conceivably decide to cut back support if Bartels finds that New York State has failed to protect the civil rights of the Willowbrook residents.

Observers saw a curtailment of federal aid as unlikely, however, and said the federal action appeared to be a strong-arm tactic designed to force quicker state compliance on key Willowbrook reforms.

A staffing audit conducted last February by the Willowbrook Review Panel, a monitor on conditions at the 2,000-bed institution, concluded there was insufficient direct-care staff on wards 24 percent of the time.

In addition, the audit stated, mid-level supervisory personnel was insufficient 55 percent of the time.

A spot check by the Advance yesterday of staffing in one building indicated a shortage of direct-care staff although programs for the residents were ongoing.

Asked if the building needed more workers to care for 78 severely disabled young adults, the unit supervisor said: "We always need more staff. But we try to make do with what is.

"A couple of years ago," she said, "we were at 1 (worker) to (every) 4 (residents); now we're back to 1-to-5 or 1-to-6."

Asked to comment on the FBI presence at Willowbrook, William Knowlton, a spokesman for the state office of retardation, said: "It's within legal precedent. From what we hear, it was strictly informational."

"As long as they don't disturb us," he said, "frankly, we don't mind."

Knowlton declined comment on charges that the institution, which once housed nearly 6,500 people, is not conforming to staffing requirements ordered by the federal court.

"It's going to be a complex hearing, and I'd rather not comment on whether the state is at fault or not at fault," he said. "How staff is counted, absentee rates and such are questions our lawyers will have to answer before the judge."