

# Judge is firm: Willowbrook staffing shortages must end

By HARRY LEICHTER  
and THOMAS CHECCHI

A federal judge ordered state mental health officials yesterday to bring staffing at the Staten Island Developmental Center up to minimum court-mandated levels.

At a hearing in Brooklyn Federal Court, Judge John R. Bartels asked parents of the Willowbrook center residents and others concerned with inadequate staffing levels to submit a document for his signature today outlining a four-month course for achieving staffing levels called for under a 1975 court order.

Bartels also ordered state officials to provide him with an employee staffing audit of the 2,200-bed institution by Jan. 30.

If the state does not comply with the so-called Willowbrook Consent Decree by that time, Bartels said, he will consider civil-contempt proceedings against Gov. Carey, Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin and the institution's director, Elin M. Howe.

All are named defendants in an ongoing, six-year court battle to reform conditions at the Willowbrook facility, once dubbed a "house of horrors" but now considered largely improved.

At yesterday's hearing, Coughlin conceded that staffing levels at the institution for the mentally retarded are not in compliance with worker-to-patient ratios set out in the 1975 decree.

Coughlin, a former director of the Willowbrook facility who himself has a retarded daughter, told Bartels the state would increase hiring and promotions at the institution to bring staffing levels up to minimum standards.

The judge answered that "I'm fed up with your excuses," alluding to broken promises and delays by the state that have slowed the pace of reform at the

developmental center.

The parents of center residents, who brought the lawsuit against the state in 1972, presented evidence at the hearing, largely in the form of audits, revealing staffing deficiencies in most of the institution's state-operated living units.

Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, testified that he counted 200 cases of patient injuries in two buildings at the center over one two-week period. He contended that understaffing was partly responsible for the unusually high incidence.

In yesterday's hearing, Bartels did not consider alleged staffing problems in buildings on the center's grounds now operated by the private United Cerebral Palsy Association.

Three of the UCP buildings, run under a shared-staff agreement with privately hired professionals and state-hired therapy aides, may revert to state control because of dissatisfaction over excessive staff absenteeism.

An audit discussed in court yesterday of direct-care and mid-level supervisory staff assigned to buildings during one week in February showed that between 25 and 50 percent of the shifts, were un-

derstaffed. The result apparently was inadequate care to the residents, many of whom require one-to-one attention.

The report also showed staffing deficiencies occurring mostly on weekend shifts, and it cited excessive absenteeism as one of the major causes.

The problem of inadequate staffing could be solved, the report concluded, by redeployment of state workers and increased hiring.

An FBI headcount of employees at the Willowbrook institution Tuesday apparently did not form the basis for Bartels' hardline stance against the state. Court observers pointed out, however, that the judge had access to the FBI tally, which was not made public at the hearing.