

Pact signed to improve care at Willowbrook

State and civil service officials yesterday signed an agreement that both sides hope will improve the quality and stability of the work force at the Staten Island Developmental Center and, in turn, improve the quality of services to the center's 2,000 retarded residents.

Known as the employee assistance program, the agreement is aimed at helping workers at the 2,000-bed state center get the kind of medical, psychiatric or financial help they might need to alleviate personal problems.

"We feel if we reach out perhaps we can prevent problems before they affect the quality of care," explained Barbara Matthews, coordinator of the program.

Parents with children at the Willowbrook center have long complained about a small segment of the 3,700-member work force, saying that their personal problems make it impossible for them to provide top-flight care. The criticism has especially been leveled at direct-care workers or attendants, traditionally the lowest-paid employee.

Mrs. Matthews said that of the 60 or so employees she has seen since the program began unofficially a few months ago many have come voluntarily for assistance or been referred because of serious financial problems, like heavy debts.

Other problems have been related to alcoholism, narcotics, or difficulties in marriage or with children. If Mrs. Matthews, a social worker, is not able to provide help, she attempts to find the proper agency in the community.

For example, she said, workers with financial woes are referred to a consumer credit agency, which helps prepare a budget for the worker. Other agencies that have received referrals already are the Staten Island Family Service, Richboro Community Mental Health Council, North Richmond Community Mental Health Center's alcoholism unit and the South Beach Psychiatric Center.



Elin Howe, left, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Barbara Matthews, coordinator of the employee assistance program, and Felton King, president of the Staten Island chapter of the Civil Service Employees Association, review an agreement to help employees solve personal problems.

Photo by Irving Silverstein

Felton King, who heads the Civil Service Employees Union's Willowbrook unit, feels the new program will improve the relationship among parents, residents, management, and workers. "Management has never before addressed the problems of many workers," King said.

"We feel with this program many potential problems can be nipped in the bud," he said.

King cited the high rate of turnover at the state center, and said that with the new program, "maybe we can find out what's the problem, why workers leave."

Mrs. Mathews said that results thus far "have been very good." "People are really glad to find that some agency can help them," she said.

The employee assistance program is currently being used at a number of state psychiatric and developmental centers where large numbers of workers are employed. The center is the second largest employer on Staten Island.

State officials said the program in no way limits the state's ability to fire or censure an employee who does not perform satisfactorily. The officials, however, point out that under current regulations it is often difficult to dismiss a worker and a better approach is to get him help for his problems.

"It has worked in private industry, so we're hoping it can work here," one official said.

—ROBERT MIRALDI

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