

UpDate

SIDC security: Has it improved?

After two women employees mysteriously disappeared from the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center last August and October, officials of the union at the sprawling state center for the retarded complained that security there was, in a word, lax.

One of the women, a registered nurse, was subsequently found murdered and buried on the grounds. The other, a mental hygiene therapist, is still missing.

As a result, the center's security force was increased from 27 to 39 and a new electronic security system was installed at the gates.

But, four months later, a spot check by the Advance revealed that security is not all that much improved. For 20 minutes recently, an Advance reporter and photographer observed cars flowing through the gates on Victory Blvd., which were in an open position. Few cars were stopped by the guard on duty.

In addition, a reporter drove onto the grounds without being stopped.

Elin Howe, director of the center, explains that only cars without identifying stickers are stopped. "Guards can look down the road and see the Willowbrook sticker and identify them as employees pretty easily," she says.

She adds that at shift change it is impossible to keep the gates down because of the volume of traffic, but that it remains down at other times. Another 10

officers have been added to the security force, Miss Howe says, adding that some employees have written letters saying how pleased they are with security improvements.

"Overall, it has been substantially improved," she says.

\$89,000 audit

Last April, the state Health Department raised some eyebrows when it approved a record Medicaid rate for a Manhattan-based center to care for 157 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents.

The \$89,435 annual rate — three times higher than that granted state institutions for the retarded — was called unjustified in light of efforts to cut health costs. State officials said the Mental Retardation Institute of New York Medical College, which operates the program in Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital, deserved the rate because of the needs of the severely retarded and multi-handicapped residents.

But, in announcing approval of the \$14-million-a-year program, state officials promised an audit to determine if the rate was justified.

That audit is now underway with early indications that the state auditors will recommend a substantial cut in the Medicaid rate, Health Department sources say.



The security gates are up and cars flow freely into and out of the Staten Island Developmental Center. But center officials say that's only when shifts change.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

Parents of residents in the program have complained that administrators have spent too much money on new furnishings for administrative offices and for salaries to non-medical officials.

John Keane, executive director of the hospital, denied the charges. But he declined to provide a list of salaries for the facilities top administrators, saying it was privileged information.

Meanwhile, the head of the Health Department bureau that set the record rate has resigned to accept a high-paying job at Westchester County Medical Center, which has an affiliation contract

with New York Medical College.

Page 2 of 2