

Connelly to conduct an inquiry of upstate developmental center

From our Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Only hours after a mid-night tour of an upstate developmental center, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly announced yesterday that she will conduct a closed-door hearing into charges of patient neglect at the facility.

Mrs. Connelly, a Democrat from West Brighton, said employees, parents and administrators associated with the O.D. Heck Developmental Center in Niskayuna will be asked to testify at the hearing, scheduled Wednesday in the Capitol.

The hearing will be conducted by the Mental Health Committee, which she chairs.

The lawmaker said that during her unannounced tour she noticed water spilled over some of the ward floors, apparently from leaks that had not been repaired. And she said the facility, in

contrast to the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, where she has her borough Assembly office, is sparsely furnished.

The hearing, to which witnesses will be subpoenaed if they fail to voluntarily testify, comes in light of allegations of understaffing and patient neglect.

Parents of mentally retarded clients living at the center have alleged that their children have suffered injuries and missed out on prescribed treatment because of a lack of staff.

"We are not conducting a witch hunt, but merely trying to get to the bottom of the charges," Mrs. Connelly said.

The assemblywoman said that the hearing is being held behind closed doors because center employees and parents fear retaliation if they speak critically of the state facility.

The lawmaker said that staffing shortages may be more of a problem at O.D. Heck, because, unlike Staten Island Developmental Center, the upstate center is not operating under a court decree. The Willowbrook Court Decree, signed by Gov. Carey in 1975, mandates minimum staffing levels at the Island institution.