

Albany.

"We can no longer tolerate the hazardous conditions and erosion in services to clients," O. D. Heck Civil Service Employees Assn. Local 445 President Peter Looker told reporters as workers behind him chanted, "Short staffing is no staffing," "Lift the freeze now" and "Quality care now."

According to Looker, staffing is down by approximately 20 percent from just one year ago, but the state tells him it must drop to 90 percent before the freeze will be lifted. "In my unit alone the average number of workers has gone from eight to five in 14 months and the state refuses to hire replacements," he explained.

The demonstrators demanded that the hiring freeze be lifted immediately and the staff level restored to that of March 1979, "so that the well-being, habilitation and health of our clients can be re-established." They also called for the allocation of sufficient staff to provide for those who have been resettled since the imposition of the freeze and that all admissions be halted until quality care and adequate programming can be achieved.

As a result of the shortage, one nurse is being left in charge of 30 or more patients at a time. There should be a minimum of three nurses with that number of clients, says Lucy Williams, CSEA shop steward and a nurse at O. D. Heck.

This situation nearly led to a disaster in a recent fire at one of the Heck buildings in February where a night aide was left watching 12 sleeping clients. Fortunately she was able to call aides from another building to help rouse, dress and lead the patients out of the burning building.

The number of accidents has gone up dramatically, says Williams, with at least one client being taken to emergency rooms a day. Just check the records at Ellis and St. Claire's Hospitals, we're there every day," she said. "The number of accidents and incidents during the month of January alone rose nearly 50 percent. We're just not able to look after them the way we should."

The aides and nurses, says Looker, are unable to get the amount and kind of training they need to deal with clients, because there are not

which they need to handle the multiple handicapped and severely disabled clients at O. D. Heck, the employees are simply learning how to physically care for their charges. "Naturally, this training is important," says Looker, "but it must go beyond the physical to enable us to give quality care."

Forced overtime is another sore spot with the employees. They are being required to work a 16-hour day to provide minimum coverage on the units, and some have been harassed by management for refusing to stay. "The administration thinks it is cutting corners by hav-

this any longer and we'll be back if we don't see some improvement soon."

The demonstration had originally been planned for April, but was postponed by the union when the Associate Commissioner of DMH Zygmund Slezak promised major staffing changes and the hiring of eight nurses.

However, instead of hiring six LPN's which the union felt were needed to best handle patients, the state hired five RN's. Also, according to Williams, the staff changes resulted in the removal of three nurses from direct patient care to supervisory duties.

Assembly committee sets hearing

As The Public Sector was going to press, State Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, chairman of the Assembly Mental Health Committee, announced her committee will conduct a formal, closed-door, hearing into allegations about staffing and working conditions at the O. D. Heck Developmental Center. She announced witnesses will include parents of residents at the facility, staff and administrators at the facility, and personnel from the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. If necessary, she noted, the committee would use subpoenas to obtain witness testimony.



DISCUSSING POOR CONDITIONS at the O. D. Heck Developmental Center is this group during a public protest demonstration outside Department of Mental Hygiene offices in Albany last week. From left are Heck employees Pat Cuthbert and Edith Feldman. At right are CSEA Shop Steward Lucy Williams, a nurse at the facility, and CSEA O.D. Heck Local President Peter Looker.