

Parents cite lack of furniture at center

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Ten years ago, exposes by the Advance and other news organizations revealed the daily horrors faced by residents of what was then called the Willowbrook State School.

Now, news revelations in the capital area have prompted a Staten Island assemblywoman to examine conditions inside another center for the retarded, the O.D. Heck Developmental Center in Siskayuna, N.Y.

Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, a Democrat from West Brighton, presided yesterday over a marathon hearing about charges of understaffing and patient abuse at the center located 10 miles north of Albany.

The lawmaker said retarded residents at the center are treated far better than were residents of Willowbrook State School in 1970. Nevertheless, Mrs. Connelly said she is disturbed by reports in newspapers and on television stations that patients are being mistreated.

The hearing was divided into two sessions. From 11

a.m. to 7 p.m. parents and staff at the center testified behind closed doors. At the evening session, state officials led by Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne testified with television cameras rolling.

Introne told the committee that staffing levels at the O.D. Heck Center are among the best in the state. Only the Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly the Willowbrook State School, and the Manhattan Developmental Center have higher employee to resident ratios, he said.

The better staffing levels at the two New York City centers are a direct result of a federal court decree.

But parents who waited hours for Introne to testify, said they were not satisfied with the commissioner's

response. "If our center is better staffed then I'd hate to see the terrible conditions that residents of other centers must live under," said Sally Wright, whose 23-year-old daughter has lived in O.D. Heck four years.

"All I want from the state is to allow my daughter to live more like other people, just a little more comfortably," Mrs. Wright said.

In addition to serious staffing shortages Mrs. Wright said the facility suffers from a lack of furniture and other "necessary" equipment. "They tried to placate us by sending in some new furniture after the television reports," she said. "But it was mostly junk, just surplus from other developmental centers."