

Job protest at developmental center

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Basic resident-care employees of the Staten Island Developmental Center threatened to expand a "sickout" today to protest what their union considers irresponsibly low staffing levels at the Willowbrook institution for the mentally retarded.

The job action by members of union Local 149 of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) began slowly with the 7 a.m. duty shift.

Preliminary job attendance tallies made early in the shift showed a 20 percent absentee rate among slightly more than 300 employees in the 16-building complex, according to James Shea, developmental center deputy director. This compares with a normal 12 percent absentee rate for the season, he said.

Shea deemed the situation "manageable," although he cautioned that the job action might pick up support as the day wears on. Some night shift workers already had been pressed into overtime duty, he said.

If the protest fever catches on some 1,100 retarded residents of the institution could be left without direct care, including dressing and feeding. CSEA members are non-professional employees, mostly mental hygiene therapy aides who spend more time than anyone else with residents.

Felton King, the local's president, said yesterday that he was not aware of any plans for workers to disrupt developmental center operations by calling in sick.

But according to several workers leaving the night shift who preferred not to be named, a job action lasting at least through tomorrow was urged yesterday at three as-

semblies of the union rank and file.

"There has been a lot of flu bug going around and people are over-exhausted," King said.

King asserted that worker morale has deteriorated over recent months. "There is a staffing problem," he said. "Staff is at an all-time low. Employees are getting hurt, patients are getting hurt, and management has refused to do anything about it."

Nearly 300 employees have been transferred to jobs at other state-run facilities since December, the union leader said. At the same time, he added, the institution's resident population has declined negligibly.

She confirmed the union leader's statistics, but noted that only about 194 of the transfers were direct care workers. He added that the transfer program was suspended two weeks ago, to give the rate of resident transfers to other facilities a chance to catch up.

Staten Island Developmental Center is under a federal court

order to empty out all but 250 residents by May 1981.

"To be very honest," Shea said, "morale has been low for some time. Probably it's at one of its lower ebbs at this point."

Shea said the discontent was fomented in part by actual staff shortages in certain buildings. But he said the administration intends to resolve this deficit by moving upwards of 60 employees assigned to indirect care into direct care areas by the middle of next week.

An uncertain sense of prospective job security among workers as the institution's population is phased out is also a significant factor in the poor morale, Shea suggested.

He blamed the union for failing to cooperate with efforts by the state Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities to work out a plan of future employment opportunities.

King was not available this morning to answer Shea's complaint.

Last night, however, he charged

that staffing patterns have repeatedly violated court-ordered guidelines. In one building a single employee was put in charge of 24 patients, three of whom were legally entitled to constant individual care, he said. In another example, he said, only nine therapy aides were available to a building that called for 18.

The Taylor Law, invoked last March against city bus and subway workers, prohibits CSEA workers from striking under pain of docked pay and penalties against union leadership, including fines and imprisonment.

The union last staged a sickout in 1977, which collapsed after three days. CSEA workers struck during contract negotiations in 1975, throwing the developmental center into chaos for more than a week.

"This job action is more formal than the last one," Shea said, "which will obviously have to be looked into."