

Willowbrook 'sickout' ebbs and flows

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

The outlook is uncertain for an apparent job action by employees of the Staten Island Developmental Center, which intensified yesterday when an estimated one out of three direct care staff failed to report for their scheduled 3:30 to 11 p.m. shift, according to administrators.

Absenteeism today, however, was once again hovering at about 20 percent — still double the norm for the summer season, authorities said. That level first was reached at 7 a.m. yesterday, which marked the start of a "sickout" reputedly staged to dramatize union charges of irresponsibly low staffing levels at the state-run institution for the mentally retarded.

Direct care staff — who perform such basic services as washing, dressing and feeding 1,100 residents — belong to Local 149 of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA). Felton King, the local's president, has disavowed any knowledge of a job action.

"We'll weather it," James Shea, the Willowbrook institution's deputy director, said of the abnormally high number of employees calling in sick.

He said clinical staff, who belong to a separate union, have been tapped to work overtime for missing direct care employees — whom he characterized as the facility's "backbone."

Staff supervisors said disrupted staffing patterns were forcing the institution to jettison some educational and recreational programming to which retarded residents are entitled by law.

One administrator speculated that workers had felt freer to stay away yesterday because paychecks had been handed out the previous day, giving them a psychological boost which he believed would rapidly diminish, with the "sickout" following suit.

Shea mimeographed and disseminated handwritten instructions for dealing with the situation to supervisors early yesterday. He warned that employees claiming illness without a physician's documentation would be docked wages by the institution and might be taken to court for violating the Taylor Law, which penalizes strikes by government employees.

But he conceded yesterday that it might not be possible to invoke such punishment until a labor arbitrator has decided whether the spate of absenteeism is "routine" or contrived.

Union leader King has charged that staffing patterns have repeatedly violated court-ordered guidelines for the institution. Single employees have been saddled with the care of as many as 24 mentally retarded residents, he said.

Several workers interviewed yesterday on the grounds of the 16-building complex reiterated King's complaints.

Shea said developmental center management and union leadership had discussed allegations of staffing shortage and poor worker morale in the past, without reaching an understanding.

"We talk quite a bit, but I don't know how well we communicate," he said. Referring to the "sickout," he added: "I don't understand the purpose except for shock value."

The CSEA office on the developmental center grounds was closed yesterday, and King, last reached there on Wednesday, could not be located for comment.

About 300 direct care workers man each of three daily shifts at the institution, according to Shea. He said the total employee census is nearly 3,000.