

Sickout ends; probe asked in patient's fall

By BRUCE ALPERT

The president of the Staten Island Developmental Center employees union yesterday called for a state probe to determine if inadequate maintenance and/or staffing shortages were responsible for a patient's falling from a window of the Willowbrook institution Saturday night.

The patient, Michael Hollender, 34, remains in critical condition in St. Vincent's Medical Center, suffering from multiple head injuries.

Meanwhile, Felton King, president of Local 149 of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), announced that a four-day "sickout" at the center ended yesterday after he said the center's administration made several concessions to union demands.

But King said if other union demands are not met by Wednesday, a "more drastic" job action will be initiated by the union's 1,000 direct-care workers. "We're not talking about a sickout this time," he said.

James Shea, deputy director of the institution for the retarded, said the state already has begun a detailed probe to determine what

caused Hollender to fall two stories to the ground from a hallway window in Building 7.

A three-foot ledge extends horizontally outside the base of the window.

The windows on center buildings are supposed to be locked to prevent such an accident. King said he believes the window was closed, "only to be forced open" when a resident, possibly Hollender, leaned against it.

"We've been having a terrible problem with maintenance in all of the buildings," King said. "The windows and buildings themselves are badly deteriorating."

Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents' group, said the 17 residents on the second floor of Building 7 were supervised by only two employees Saturday night. And at the time of the fall, Pinto said, only one employee was on duty because the other was on a dinner break.

Because of the physical layout of the ward, Pinto said it is virtually impossible for one employee to keep track of 17 residents.

King, meanwhile, said he has telegraphed Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels to ask that state Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne be held in contempt of court for not meeting staffing requirements of a 1975 court decree.

"We think patient welfare is in danger," King said.

Introne, in an interview, denied there were any shortages, noting that the administration was bolstering direct-care staff beyond consent decree requirements by transferring 63 employees from programming duty to residential care.

"We've had enough staff to be in compliance with the consent decree," Introne said. "Our problem has been in the number of people calling in sick during the last few days."

During the four-day sickout, absenteeism ranged between 20 and 33 percent, two to three times the normal rate for this time of year.

In announcing the end of the sickout, King noted that the administration had agreed to return 63 workers assigned to programming duties back to the direct care of residents. In addition, King said, the administration agreed to institute mandatory overtime whenever staffing levels fall dangerously low.

King said the administration also has agreed to delay implementation of a new work schedule, slated to begin next week, for 30 days. Further, King said, the administration agreed to discuss changes made in employee pass days. The union opposes both the new work schedule and the changes in days off for some employees.

Finally, King said, the administration accepted a union request to continue discussions on a union demand to close a recently opened day center in Mariners Harbor operated by United Cerebral Palsy of New York for residents of six buildings at Willowbrook. The union maintains the building is unsafe, a charge vehemently denied by United Cerebral Palsy.

Shea agreed with King's assessment of the negotiations, but said the center had agreed to transfer the 63 employees to direct-care duty last week, before the sickout began.