

Parents detail UCP failings in caring for retarded

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Complaining of deteriorating conditions in the Karl D. Warner Center, a Willowbrook institution for the mentally retarded, a group of parents met yesterday with the institution's administrators and a state commissioner.

The parents said the 450-bed institution, operated by United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, has failed to provide adequate services to its patients in areas including education, recreation, food, clothing and transportation.

"We are all here to try to create a system which addresses the needs of the clients," said Anthony Pinto, a member of the parents' committee. "This is not meant to destroy anything. It is meant to improve the facilities we have available."

Joseph R. Harris, one of three commissioners in the state Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled, attended

the meeting at the parents' request.

Often emotional, the meeting stretched into more than three hours of debate on a 6-page agenda prepared by the parents. About 10 parents and an equal number of United Cerebral Palsy administrators participated in the session in a Warner Center building.

Keith Penman, director of the Warner Center, conceded that the parents were accurate in most of the deficiencies they cited. He said, however, that United Cerebral Palsy had developed a new table of organization for the institution's 2,500-member staff which would remedy a wide range of problems.

But Peter Siringano, a member of the parents' committee, accused United Cerebral Palsy of operating through trial and error. "Your method is to

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say that if this plan here doesn't work, then we'll go to Plan D or Plan E or Plan F," Siringano said.

At the urging of Commissioner Harris, Penman agreed to offer a timetable for improvement of the facility. By mid-November, he said, the staff reorganization will be complete and an evaluation of its success will be possible.

"I want to assure both UCP and the parents that the commission will continue to monitor very carefully to see to what extent commitments that have been made here today are implemented," Harris said. "The ultimate test will be not only what's on paper, or even what has been done, but the effect on the quality of life of the people who are living here."

United Cerebral Palsy is a charitable agency which, under contract to the state, operates institutions and group homes for nearly 1,000 mentally retarded patients. The Warner Center is the agency's largest institution, with a \$26-million annual budget funded primarily through Medicaid.

The parents provided their most detailed documentation in the area of shortages in equipment and supplies.

Marian McMorris, who chaired the meeting from the parents' side, complained that United Cerebral Palsy lacked a regular plan of repair and maintenance. "Nothing is ever done until it becomes a crisis," she said.

"Yes, there is a significant lack of supplies, unfortunately," Penman responded. "It has its peaks and valleys. The biggest problem we have right now is with the laundry."

Among deficiencies listed by the parents were: only 40 towels allotted to dry 85 patients; 60 sheets for 80 beds; one diaper per patient during an 8-hour shift; a severe shortage of soap, forcing the staff to cut bars into slivers.

Due to the shortage of towels, the parents said, staff at the institution resorted to drying their patients with torn shirts and undershirts.

The parents attributed the lack of linen to chronic breakdowns of the facility's five washing machines and five dryers. On a recent day, they said, only two washing machines and one dryer were functioning.

To dramatize the scanty maintenance, the parents circulated copies of a memorandum from Stanley Jakubowski, the chief engineer for United Cerebral Palsy.

The memo warned that beginning Sept. 28, most maintenance personnel would be assigned to renovations of the agency's administrative headquarters in midtown Manhattan.

Jakubowski said a "skeleton crew" would be available to cope with "extreme emergencies" in the agency's group homes and institutions throughout New York City.

The parents of three different patients stepped forward to demonstrate that their children's

wheelchairs were cramped, a problem they said was widespread.

"She sits in something that doesn't fit her at all, she's practically getting deformed," one mother said. The woman said she had not yet received a wheelchair promised three years ago.

According to the parents, education and training in daily living skills has been neglected. They cited an instance when 12 patients were left in a classroom supervised only by a janitor.

Penman said he was not aware of classrooms left unsupervised, although he said he knew patients were sometimes left alone on the wards.

The parents complained of unsafe vehicles and insufficient or cold food. For the past three weeks, they said, many patients have received a lunch consisting only of macaroni and cheese, apple sauce and juice.

Penman said buses and vans are inspected in accordance with state regulations, but he agreed to review the luncheon menus.

Finally, the parents complained of low staff morale, particularly among employees who provide direct care such as washing, dressing and feeding the patients. "The staff is a dedicated staff which can do their job," Pinto said, "but they're not getting the supervision they need from a higher level."

Mrs. McMorris added that the parents, like the staff, have found communications strained with the administration of United Cerebral Palsy. She said the agency's executive director, Robert Schonhorn, had refused to meet with the parents after working hours, in a forum such as the one held yesterday.

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