

State employees absent more than most civil servants

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ALBANY — Saying that New York State employees call in sick 50 percent more often than other public employees, the state Office of Employee Relations announced a plan yesterday aimed at cracking down on flagrant absentees.

Although no statistics were available yesterday, officials said one trouble spot has been the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook. "It's preposterous," said Office of Employee Relations Director Meyer S. Frucher, noting that a federal court judge has required the state to hire additional workers to make up for the high number of absent workers there.

Charles Devane, director of human resources for the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said his agency is teaching supervisors at the Willowbrook institution how to deal with employees who constantly call in sick. "We have recognized that absenteeism at the Staten Island Developmental Center has been a problem and we're determined to do something about it," Devane said.

Frucher, at an Albany press conference, said state employees use an average of 10.4 sick days a year, compared to 8 days a year for federal employees and 7 days a year for all public employees. One-day absences account for 43.2 percent of state sick leaves and more than half the one-day absences fall on the first and last days of the work week.

"What that means in plain English is a lot of three-day weekends," Frucher said.

Excessive sick leave, Frucher estimated, costs the state about \$40 million in lost productivity plus additional millions in extra wages paid to employees forced to work overtime to fill in for absent co-workers.

Frucher said the state is preparing a handbook to help supervisors combat high absenteeism. Among the handbook's suggestions are requirements that an employee call in sick to the supervisor, or a designated individual — not to a switchboard operator — and a periodic review of attendance records so trends such as heavy Monday or Friday "illnesses" can be spotted.

Frucher suggests that those calling be required to bring a note from a doctor, or be visited at home to make sure they are in fact sick.

Gary Freyer, spokesman for the Civil Service Employees Association, which represents the bulk of state workers, said Frucher's statistics are meaningless because they compared substantially different groups of workers.

"We don't think absenteeism is a serious problem," Freyer said, noting that relatively high absentee rates at institutions such as Staten Island Developmental Center can be attributed to the difficult work employees must perform. "A lot are absent because they are constantly being beat up or hurt while doing the job," he said.

Freyer attributed the timing of Frucher's press conference to the beginning of contract negotiations between the state and unions representing state employees. Contracts for most state workers expire on March 31.