

Willowbrook says judge slings mud

By BELLA ENGLISH

Angry officials of the Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook yesterday denied charges by a federal judge that the facility is filthy and infested with vermin, and said they would appeal a court plan to appoint an outside party to oversee improvements.

In a 70-page opinion handed down Wednesday, Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels charged that conditions at Willowbrook have worsened since a 1975 consent decree by which officials agreed to improve services and reduce the number of patients.

Bartels, who took an unannounced tour of Willowbrook in December, said the place was filthy and infested with rodents and roaches. Residents, he said, sometimes lie naked in their own excrement, bedrooms smell of urine, the floors are dirty and food is stored in temperatures that permit spoilage.

AT A HASTILY called press conference yesterday, Willowbrook director Ella Curry labeled Bartel's comments inaccurate, and unbalanced. "There are isolated cases of this nature in any institution of this size," she said. "The total disregard to the dedication of staff on behalf of our clients is a disservice."

Curry rolled a brief videotaped segment from a television reporter's 1975 expose of Willowbrook's horrors, which showed naked, neglected patients.

Following the film clip, officials

took reporters on a tour of four Willowbrook buildings where patients eat, sleep, play and, in some cases, participate in therapy. No rats, roaches or filth were visible during the tour. Bathrooms, however, smelled of urine. A few residents sat idly in wheelchairs. Most were fully dressed, although in odd, often mismatched clothing. Bedrooms were sparsely furnished, with regulation beds and lockers, but appeared relatively clean.

"WHEN YOU HAVE clients who urinate all the time and rip their clothes off, there's nothing we can do," said Helen McNally, a ward supervisor who has worked at Willowbrook since 1948. Added another employe: "They're smearers. They eat their own feces. We do the best we can."

Officials said that many residents are incontinent. An exterminator is on the premises daily, they said.

William McGowan, president of the Civil Service Employees Association, which represents about 2,600 Willowbrook employes, called Bartel's decision "a perfect example of a two-faced federal administration that cuts federal funding and then complains about the consequences." Extensive cutbacks in the budget, he said, were responsible for problems with employe morale and patient treatment.

Bartel's action came after several plaintiffs, including the Association For Retarded Children, complained that the 1975 consent order was being violated. The judge's latest order also extended from April 1, 1981, to April 1, 1985, the deadline by which Willowbrook must reduce its population to 250. The current population is 1,369, he said. ■