

# Agencies for retarded object to court order

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Dr. Ella A. Curry, the director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, denounced yesterday as "devastating" and "inaccurate" a federal court ruling that New York State has failed to reform the institution for the mentally retarded in Willowbrook.

Dr. Curry led reporters on an hourlong tour of a gymnasium, sleeping cubicles, classrooms and other facilities in the Willowbrook complex, which the state pledged to clean up in a 1975 court consent decree.

Meanwhile, Paul R. Keitzman, an attorney for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said his agency is "inclined to appeal every semicolon and clause" of

the 70-page ruling issued Wednesday by U.S. District Judge John R. Bartels in Brooklyn.

Bartels said he would appoint an overseer of state institutions and group homes housing 3,156 mentally retarded patients, including 1,369 at Willowbrook.

Keitzman said the question of whether to appeal probably would not be resolved until next week, in consultation with Gov. Carey's legal staff and private attorneys.

Zygmund Slezak, state commissioner of mental retardation, and leaders of the unions that represent Willowbrook employees echoed Dr. Curry's disagreement with the court ruling.

"Our clients are getting good

care and are not in danger," Slezak said in a written statement. The commissioner said he was "appalled" by the language of the judge's ruling. "Such sensationalist rhetoric can only serve to undermine the morale of the employees," he said.

In a typically graphic passage, based on 25 days of trial testimony last December and January and on his own impromptu visit to Willowbrook, Bartels said:

"Unsanitary conditions permeate the residents' entire living space. Residents, many of whom are nonambulatory, must eat in dining rooms infested with insects and rodents, sit and lie on floors that are dirty, not uncommonly with human excrement, and sleep in bathrooms reeking of urine."

During the tour yesterday of three buildings led by Dr. Curry, only the stench of urine was obvious, which she attributed to the 50-year-old physical plant and to a cleaning solution containing ammonia.

Page 1

of

2 Pages

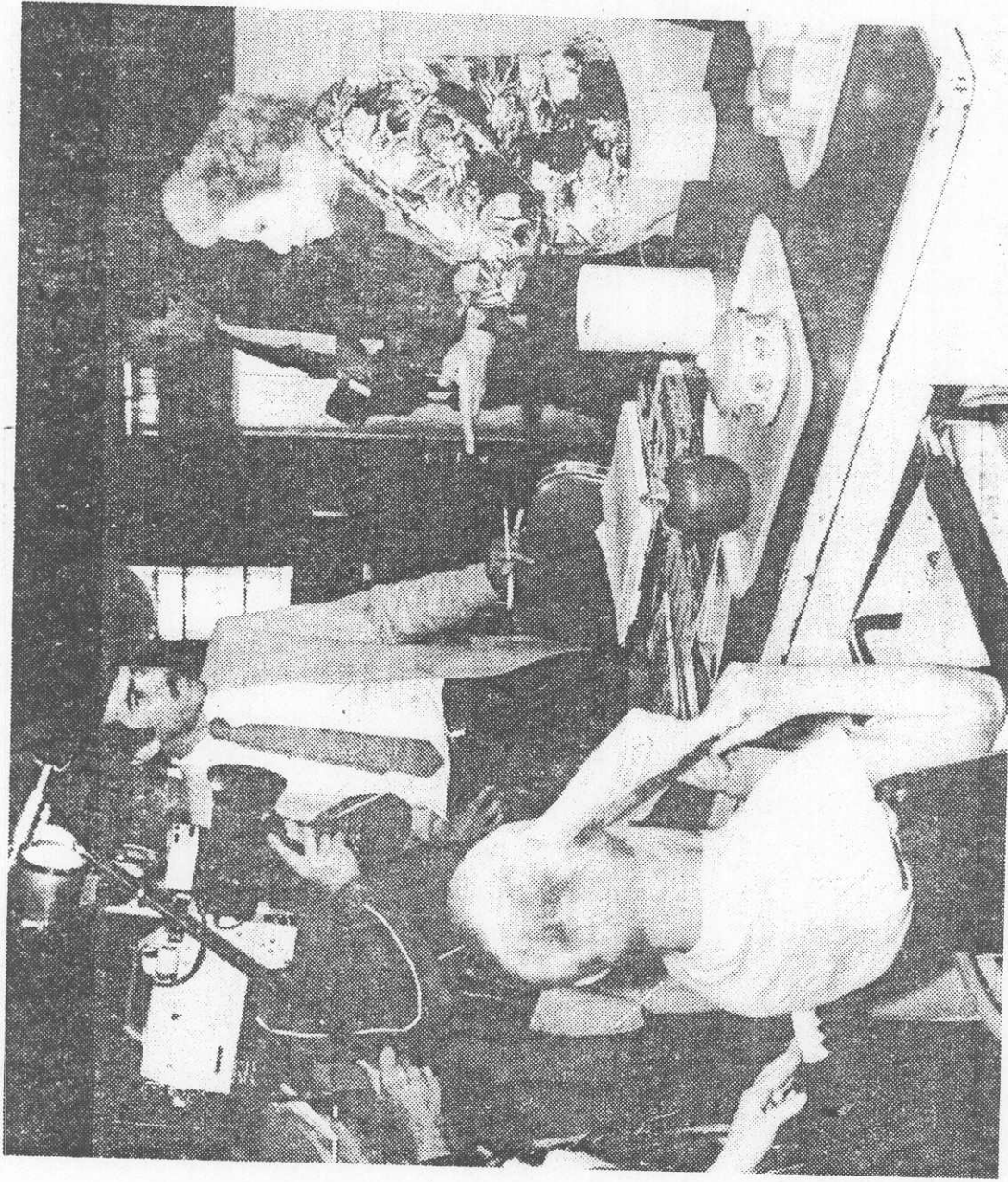
In the gymnasium of Building 8, employees said 104 retarded patients clambered over soft plastic geometric sculptures each day. Asked why some of the male patients had scabs and bruises on their faces, an employee said, "Many of the clients who are very low-functioning scratch themselves, or they fight."

In Building 6, totally empty of patients, single beds covered with identical green spreads stood in concrete cubicles. The bedboards were labeled with patients' names, handwritten on masking tape. The walls were bare, except for neatly taped state-issue posters, bearing slogans like "I Love New York" or Health Department admonitions to eat cereal.

Although each cubicle was equipped with a wooden closet, none of the closets had anything to wear in it. "You have to remember that our clients are low-functioning," Dr. Curry said. "They rip off their clothes and even chew on them." Garments, she said, were issued from a central storage area.

As the tour group strolled through the maze of Building 6, monochromatic color schemes succeeded each other — blue in the first room, orange walls through the next door, and lime green on every inch of a third room.

Helen McNally, a mid-level supervisor who has worked at Willowbrook since 1948 and an outspoken grandmother, welcomed the dazzling television lights and scribbling reporters' pencils in Building 10.



Helen McNally, right, tells reporters about conditions in the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Page 2 of 3 pages



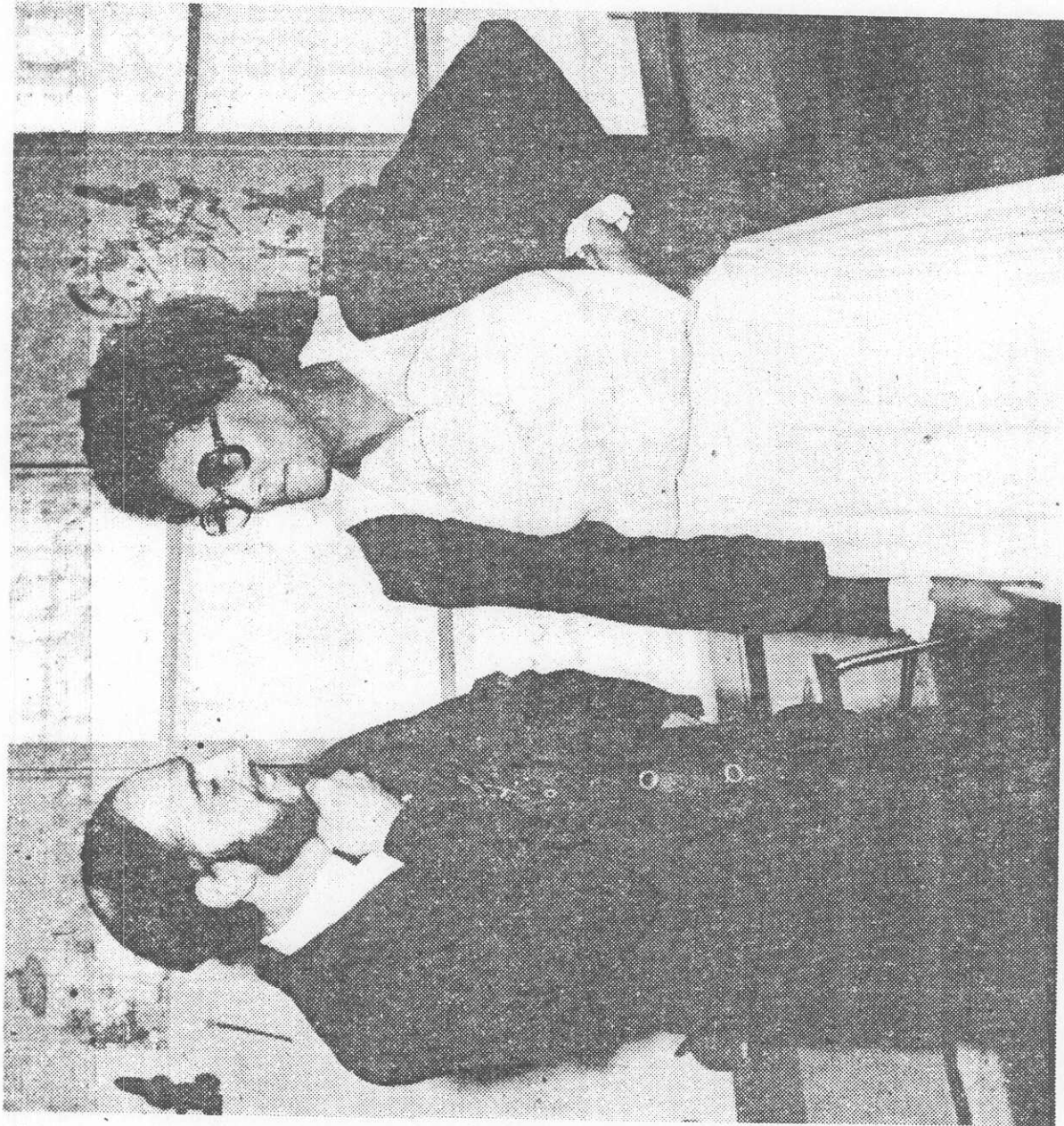
Male patients in wheelchairs surrounded her in a circle. Most of the patients looked middle-aged, some slumped listlessly, others gazed and grinned, and one let forth a wail that was ignored by everyone although it was amplified and echoed by the concrete ward.

"In certain buildings there is nothing you can do with these clients," Mrs. McNally said. "You have clients that urinate all the time, that rip their clothes off."

Nonetheless, she said, the institution was getting a bum rap. The food, in her opinion, was good and plentiful. The medical attention was enough to put ordinary parents "in the poorhouse paying doctor bills." The clothes were another matter, she readily conceded — scarce, flimsy and out of season. As for cleanliness, she said, "Well, it can be done."

The biggest problem with the way the state operates Willowbrook, Mrs. McNally said firmly, is that "We don't have the money, honey."

Asked whether she had been warned to expect a visit from reporters, Mrs. McNally shook her head, "No." "In fact," she belatedly enthused, "This is the first time I've had the pleasure to meet our director, Dr. Curry."



Dr. Ella A. Curry, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, and Dr. Harold Brandweing, acting deputy director of treatment services, talk during a tour of the center.

S.I. Advance Photos by Irving Silverstein

Page 3 of 3 Pages