

Fewer developmental center aides face layoffs

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

The number of employees who face layoffs from the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook has been reduced, state officials said last week.

Meanwhile, some workers complained they received dismissal notices shortly before their pensions were to be vested, while others said they would be forced to commute to mental health jobs in other boroughs if they did not want to join the ranks of the unemployed.

Hundreds of employees in state-run institutions for the mentally retarded throughout New York State are finding that their jobs are threatened by state budgetary constraints and by the move toward community residences for the retarded, often operated by private agencies.

The impact is most severe at the Staten Island Developmental Center, which is under a federal court order to transfer all but 250 mentally retarded patients into apartments and group homes in the community by April 1985. As the institution reduces its population of 819 patients, the current census of 2,132 employees must shrink proportionately.

Officials said that in recent weeks the number of employees who face layoffs at Willowbrook has fallen from 248 to 155. In the state as a whole, the number of jobs scheduled to be eliminated has decreased from 528 to 198.

Margaret McGraw, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said 330 jobs statewide had been saved because of resignation, retirement or other attrition, and because some employees had volunteered to take jobs in community residences.

"The bottom line is that the impact will not be so traumatic when all of the efforts have been exhausted for employees to go

into the community," Miss McGraw said.

The state has sent out surveys to 800 institutional employees over the summer, asking if they would volunteer for jobs in community residences and if they would be willing to travel to new jobs in other towns or other boroughs of New York City.

In addition, Miss McGraw said, employees have been notified that state civil service laws allow them to displace less senior employees. Thus, in a sort of domino effect, a veteran psychologist from Willowbrook could occupy the job of a novice at a state institution in Brooklyn, throwing the less senior psychologist out of work.

Certain workers in the field of mental retardation also have the right to transfer to jobs in state-run hospitals for the mentally ill, Miss McGraw said. This option is limited to nonprofessional employees who are members of the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), a statewide union.

Most professional employees at Willowbrook, including teachers, doctors, psychologists, and speech, recreation and physical therapists, belong to the Professional Employees Federation.

James Walsh, deputy director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, said the layoffs would be equally divided between professional and non-professional employees. About 18 jobs titles, out of a total of 100, are being reduced, he said. Within each title, layoffs will be determined by seniority, he added.

He said the secure jobs seem to be clerical, employees who clothe, feed and provide other hands-on services for the patients, maintenance and safety workers. Those immediately threatened seem to be teachers, janitors, ward aides and food-service workers, he said.

Walsh said the 155 jobs now threatened at Willowbrook are held by people who indicated they would not be willing to work outside Staten Island. Although some of those employees may yet find opportunities to transfer, they are being sent termination notices, he said.

"If they selected Richmond County, then they would be separated from the payroll," Walsh warned.

Several employees have called the Advance to complain that they have received dismissal notices although they have spent long careers at Willowbrook.

One professional, who requested anonymity, said she got a lay-off notice effective Oct. 1 — only 21 days before her pension is due to be vested.

Walsh conceded it was a "possibility" that retirement benefits could be threatened. But he said such a dismissal notice would have gone out arbitrarily, rather than in a deliberate effort to shed the state's pension obligations.

He said the state would be sympathetic to employees who wanted to collect their pensions, normally vested after 10 years of service. If specific cases were brought to the administration's attention, "We would of course try to make some arrangement," he said.

Three state institutions for the mentally retarded beside Willowbrook must reduce their employee census, according to Miss McGraw.

The other institutions are the Rome Developmental Center in Oneida County, scheduled to lay off 15 workers; the J.N. Adam Developmental Center in Chhattaquia County, with 21 prospective layoffs, and the Craig Developmental Center in Livingston County, due to dismiss seven employees.