

Willowbrook workers discover survey form decided their futures

By BRUCE ALPERT

When Geri Powder filled out an employment survey last summer, she didn't realize her answers would result in the loss of her teaching job at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Ms. Powder, a West Brighton resident, is one of 70 center employees, mostly professionals, scheduled to be laid off today because they didn't express a willingness to work in an area where jobs turned out to be available.

"We played Russian roulette with our lives, only we didn't know it at the time," said Ms. Powder, a teacher at the Willowbrook center for 5½ years.

Ms. Powder wrote on the survey form that she would accept jobs upstate and in Westchester and Rockland counties. But she said she was not aware that center employees were not given a preference for jobs outside of New York City. She had also checked off Brooklyn as a possible job site, but lacked the seniority to gain employment in that borough's developmental center.

Conversely, employees with less experience than Ms. Powder, but who had expressed a willingness to work in places such as Queens and the Bronx, were offered jobs.

"They just didn't give us enough information," said Donald

Desmond of St. George, a Willowbrook teacher for 8½ years.

Ironically, the employees are being laid off for the same reason many of them were hired in the first place — a 1975 consent decree.

The decree, which settled a suit brought on behalf of center patients, mandated improved care and brought higher staffing levels to the Willowbrook institution.

But it also ordered the state to transfer center patients into smaller community facilities, where mental retardation experts believe they can more easily reach their learning potential. And as the patient exodus continued — Willowbrook now has about 800 residents compared to more than 5,000 in 1972 — there was a need to reduce staff, state officials said.

Many of those employees selected for the first layoff contend, however, that they could have secured jobs at other state facilities if they had been informed of the survey's importance.

"If they had only given us the information, we would have filled out the forms differently," said teacher Anthony Trani of Brooklyn, who had expressed a preference to work either on Staten Island or his home borough. If he knew that job assignments would be based on how he filled out the form, Trani said, he would have indicated a willingness to work in more locations.

But Dr. Ella Curry, the center's director, said the survey forms clearly indicated that they would be used to determine which workers would be moved to other facilities when staff reductions at the Island center occurred.

The Public Employees Federation, the union that represents the center's professional employees, is challenging the legality of the layoffs in state Supreme Court, Albany. A hearing on the suit is scheduled to begin on Monday before Judge Harold Hughes.

If it succeeds, the layoff would be a short one. But state officials contend that there is little chance the layoff notices will be successfully challenged.

Many of the laid-off workers met yesterday with state officials to discuss the status of their employee benefits. Some are concerned about retirement benefits, unemployment insurance and the status of seniority gained at the Willowbrook center.

Teacher Jackie Gale of West Brighton, who is pregnant and expects to give birth next week, wondered whether she will receive maternity benefits now that she is being laid off. Nor-



Donald Desmond



Arthur Trani

mally, she said, an employee on maternity leave is entitled to half of her regular pay for six weeks.

"Now, I might get nothing," Ms. Gale said. "I can't seem to get a straight answer."

Some employees said they were offered jobs at other centers, only to lose them when workers with more seniority turned up.

"At this point, I'm just fed up," said Maria Steinheber, a teacher with 11 years experience at Willowbrook. "First, I have a job and then I don't. I just don't know if I could take getting another job, only to be bumped again."



Geri Powder



Marie Steinheber