

Workers flock to early retirement

State program may leave facilities understaffed

By BRUCE ALPERT

So many people are taking the state up on its offer of extra benefits for retiring early that some mental health and retardation centers may go understaffed, some officials said yesterday.

Gov. Mario M. Cuomo had projected that 3,400 would take advantage of the program, which is designed to avert employee layoffs. But more than number has already filed retirement papers almost a month before the

Mar. 8 deadline. The deputy state comptroller handling the program, now expects that number to climb above 5,000.

While the higher than expected number of early retirements is good news for state workers faced with a May 5 layoff notice, some officials are concerned about the effects on services, especially at psychiatric and mental health facilities.

Dr. Ella Curry, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, said she fears the center will lose many of its most experienced nurses and administrators

"Right now, we are operating with a hiring freeze," Curry said. "I'm obviously concerned about staffing shortages so I will ask that we be exempted from the current hiring freeze so we can fill vital positions lost to early retirements."

Dr. Curry said 380 of the center's 1,300 state employees are eligible for early retirement. So far, she said, 65 have gone to the center's personnel department seeking the required forms.

A state mental health official, who asked not to be identified, also expressed concern.

"The problem is that we are going to lose our most experienced people and they tend to be people in key positions that are tough to replace," the official said. "And since you can't control it, we may lose a lot of people in one area and few in another, making it tough to maintain certain services."

The state estimates that 29,000

state workers are eligible for the special benefits for early retirement.

Under the program, given legislative approval last month, workers between 55 and 61 will be given three additional years of credit toward pensions if they choose to retire early. Workers 62 and over will get an additional one-year credit.

State budget officials say that for every 100 employees who retire early beyond the original 3,400 projection, 75 state jobs will be saved.

They had projected that 3,100 would lose their jobs if only 3,400 retired early.

But Mauhs, who is coordinating the early retirement program, said the number of early retirements is likely to rise above 5,000.

"I'd say we've already had 3,500 applications come in," he said. "Our office is doing a month's amount of work in a day

because so many people are coming in."

Initially, some workers complained that personnel offices at the Staten Island Developmental Center and South Beach Psychiatric Center had no information about the early retirement program.

But that has been remedied, according to officials at both centers. Key personnel staff, they said, were briefed yesterday on the program's provisions.

Mauhs said the state has set up an information number for state employees. The number is 1-518-474-7736.

Ira Kleiman, spokesman for South Beach, said, however, that he doesn't expect many takers at his center.

That is because the center is only 11 years old and therefore has relatively few employees with enough state experience to qualify for retirement. Kleiman said Kleiman estimated that only about 30 of the center's 1,000 employees would qualify for the program.

Mauhs said he could not say how much an average employee could expect to gain by retiring early. But he said he expects the state retirement system will be hit with \$16,200 in additional costs for each employee who takes advantage of the program.