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Job freeze straps mental facilities

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ALBANY — Union leaders at Staten Island's psychiatric and mental retardation centers say a continued statewide hiring freeze threatens patient services.

The union leaders say the employee census at both the South Beach Psychiatric Center and Staten Island Developmental Center are falling below the goals set by the Cuomo adminis-

tration when it began a cost-saving move to reduce the state work force.

At the Staten Island Developmental Center, according to a union leader, 137 workers have opted for early retirement under a new incentive program and others have left through normal attrition.

"That combined with earlier layoffs at the center will make it difficult for us to provide meals

and other essential services for clients," said John Jackson, president of the Willowbrook center's Civil Service Employees Association.

"We're going to have a real crisis here unless we can lift the freeze and fill the areas where we have serious shortages," he added.

The center, which currently employs about 1,900 workers, lost about 200 last year through lay-

offs and transfers to other state facilities.

At the South Beach Psychiatric Center, Barry Markman, director of the center's Professional Employees Association Chapter, said the center hasn't been able to fill vacancies for months under a statewide hiring freeze.

Although the center is slated to lose an additional 31 positions by May 27 — five through layoffs — Markman said the real problem

is the statewide hiring freeze.

"We probably can live with the layoffs, but people have been leaving through normal attrition and we just can't replace them," Markman said.

As a result, he said, the center has already closed out-patient clinics in Princes Bay and Brooklyn. And now, he says, there is talk about transferring an additional 10 to 15 out-patient workers to in-patient services.

"The out-patient services are absolutely critical," Markman said. "We have to provide support services for those people we put in the community. Otherwise, we'll just be back to the old institutional model."

Ira Kleiman, spokesman for South Beach, said the center employee census is expected to drop next week to 1,008, down from

(See HIRING, Page A 4)

Page 4

1,069 in March 1982.

In addition to possible additional cuts in out-patient services, Kleiman said the staff cuts will make it more difficult for the center to maintain its physical plant and manage its quality assurance program.

Robert Spoor, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Health, said a combination of layoffs, the hiring freeze and early retirements are causing job shortages throughout the state mental health system.

"We've been in discussions with the Office of the Budget and the governor's office to try and develop a plan to fill vital positions, particularly in direct patient-care services," Spoor said.

Peter Lynch, a deputy budget director, said the state is prepared to "selectively" lift the freeze to fill needed direct care positions at state psychiatric facilities.

Meanwhile, other mental health and mental retardation officials say they hope to persuade the governor's office to cancel some of the planned layoffs scheduled to begin Friday.

Carol Schlageter-Chady, spokeswoman for the Office of Employee Relations, said the state has already moved to reduce the layoffs planned for next Wednesday and Friday at state mental health, mental retardation and alcoholism service programs from 1,300 to 654.

Part of the reduction can be attributed, she said, to the early retirements.

The state estimates that more than 7,000 workers will take advantage of a plan that offers increased pension benefits for those who retire early.

Cuomo offered the plan last February as a way to avert some employee layoffs.

Page
2 of 2