

Police break up drug ring at developmental center

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and JEAN LEVINE

A drug ring operated by employees of the Staten Island Developmental Center was broken last night when police arrested eight employees. More arrests are expected today.

Police said the eight suspects sold cocaine, heroin and LSD to fellow employees and others who drove onto the grounds of the Willowbrook institution. The drugs were not sold to patients, but the drug deals allegedly took place while the employees were supposed to be caring for patients.

Each of the dealers arrested sold between \$200 and \$300 worth of drugs a day, police said.

The investigation of the Willowbrook drug ring began in January with "the fullest cooperation" of the center's administration, said Lt. William McNeice of

the Brooklyn South-Staten Island Narcotics Squad. He did not know how long the drug operation had been going on.

Six of the eight employees were arrested last night at the end of their 3 to 11 p.m. shifts. The other two were arrested at 8 a.m. as they began their day shift.

"We waited until the end of the tour of work so the patients would not be placed in jeopardy for lack of care," McNeice said. "Our main concern was that patients would be properly supervised until the next crew came on."

The first six employees arrested, all Staten Islanders, were: Helen Chavis, 25, and Peter Etheridge, 40, both of 178 Lockman Ave., Mariners Harbor; Jacob Givens, 35, of 50 N. Burgher Ave., West Brighton; Gordon James, 28, of 51 Arnold St., New

Brighton; Theodore Handy, 40, of 175 Trantor Pl., Elm Park, and Ada "Cooky" Rodriguez, 25, of 195 Gordon St., Stapleton.

Two others, both from Newark, were arrested this morning. They were Laverne Leverage, 35, and James Ward, 38.

All eight were identified as mental health therapists or aides. They were all charged with drug dealing. Ms. Chavis and Handy were also charged with drug possession.

Police would not say what led them to the developmental center, except that it was based on "discreet investigative efforts." They said it was believed to be the first major drug busts at the center.

The developmental center has 789 patients and more than 1,900 employees, police said.

The suspects are to be arraigned today in Stapleton Criminal Court.