

11th suspect nabbed in center drug sales

By JEAN LEVINE

Another suspect in an employee drug ring that had been operating at least 18 months at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook has been arrested by police.

The suspect, Patricia Tolbert, 23, of 302 Bradley Ave., Meiers Corners, a former mental health therapy aide at the state institution for the mentally and physically handicapped, was taken into custody in her home, authorities said. She has been charged with the sale of heroin, officials added.

More arrests are expected within the next few days, but police declined to say how many.

The suspect was arraigned Wednesday in Stapleton Criminal Court and released on her own recognizance, after Judge Royal Radin ordered that the case be waived to a grand jury for disposition.

A week ago, police arrested 10 employees — eight of them mental health therapists and two mental health aides — on the same charge. Nearly all of the suspects were from Staten Island, and all had worked at the center for at least a decade, authorities said. Nine of the defendants, most of whom had no prior criminal record, were released without bail by Judge Royal Radin following their arraignment last Friday.

The cases against the 11 suspects, including Miss Tolbert, are scheduled to go before the grand jury sometime next week, officials said.

Sgt. Dennis Gill of the Brooklyn South-Staten Island Narcotics squad, which has been conducting a five-month-long probe into the sale of drugs at the center, said Miss Tolbert, a four-year employee, had allegedly been selling heroin on the state-owned property for "at least five months" — up until the time she had been laid off from her job last March. Police said she is currently unemployed.

Lt. William McNeice, assigned to the same narcotics unit, estimated the ring netted its participants — each of whom operated

independently of one another — collectively about \$225,000 annually. He said each dealer sold between \$200 and \$300 worth of cocaine, LSD or heroin a day.

Police believe 60 percent of the drug sales involved heroin.

The center's director, Dr. Ella Curry, said she first noticed the growing drug distribution problem among the 36-year-old institution's 1,800 employees in 1981, reporting it to her superiors, who contacted police last January.

Authorities contend that the 11 supposedly sold drugs to fellow employees and others who "knew of the availability of drugs on the property" and came to certain buildings on the institution's 383-acre campus to buy it.

Mrs. Curry said it was the first time the center had had such a large number of people arrested for drug dealings. In the past it had involved only a few isolated instances, she added.

However, none of the patients had suffered from loss of or lack of care because of the drug situation, authorities added.

Gill said the investigation is "still continuing."