

Strike by bus drivers, matrons leaves handicapped stranded

By JULIE MACK

About 350 mentally retarded persons are battling cabin fever, with some exhibiting anger and frustration at being homebound, while striking transportation workers for United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of New York State begin their second week on the picket lines.

"Health is definitely being affected," said one UCP official about the clients, claiming that even the non-verbal patients seem upset that their daily routines have been disturbed.

On strike are about 100 bus drivers and bus monitors who belong to Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181-1061. The walkout, which began Sept. 26, has left about 700 UCP patients citywide without regular transportation to day programs and recreational activities.

Residents on Staten Island have been affected the most, said UCP officials. About 400 UCP patients live on the Island, including some of the most severely disabled. While those who live in apartments and group homes in other boroughs can use mass transportation to attend workshops and schools, only a few of the Staten Island clients are physically able to travel in a bus or taxi.

The remainder — which includes 280 patients at the Karl D. Warner Center on the grounds of Staten Island Developmental Center; 50 patients at the Nina Eaton Center at South Beach Psychiatric Center, and 10 persons at a group home in Great Kills — are stuck at their residential facilities.

Classes are being relocated at the Warner and Eaton centers, but the staff is working without proper equipment or space, said Cora Hoffman, assistant executive director of UCP.

"Normally we have 130 to 140 people at Warner who leave every day to go to the CTC (the Community Training Center in Mariners Harbor). The others, who are under 21, go to a school program on the grounds," said Mrs. Hoffman. "Now, nobody is going out, so we're having to double up on classrooms and we're running double sessions.

"Also, the patients at Warner are often very seriously disabled, so their programming at CTC involves a lot of equipment. We just don't have that equipment at Warner, so the staff is working under that constraint. The situation is just the same at Nina Eaton."

But the strike may be hardest on clients at the group home in Great Kills, said Mrs. Hoffman.

"At least at Warner and at Eaton, the grounds are fairly large," she said. "At the group home, those people just have to stare at the same four walls."

Jacqueline Rumolo, primary care supervisor at the group home, located at 455 Medina St., said clients there are feeling restless and have been asking why they are no longer bused to the Community Training Center.

"One patient, Margaret, is somewhat verbal and she's asking us, 'what's going on? When am I going to school?' She is really feeling confined," said Ms. Rumolo. "She likes to go to programming and see other people. These past few days, she's been more hyper, pacing back and forth in her wheelchair."

Other clients have had similar reactions, said Ms. Rumolo.

"You have to understand that even a simple thing like the half-hour bus ride (to the training center) every day is very important to them," said Ms. Rumolo. "That's exposure for them — there's so much to see.

"The programming gives them an opportunity to see other people. They definitely miss it.

"There is one client, for instance, whose big thing every night is to say 'I've got to go to bed so I can go to school tomorrow,'" said Ms. Rumolo.

"Now he doesn't have that," she added. "He keeps asking us about school and the bus. He's definitely a lot sadder these days, and he's obviously nervous about not getting back to school.

"Even the clients who can't express themselves are becoming fidgety and want different things to do. This strike has made them prisoners of their own home."

The problem is complicated by that fact that her clients have limited ability to communicate, so it is difficult for staff to explain the situation, she said.

"How do they really understand?" said Ms. Rumolo. "Certainly they know that there is no bus, no school, but that is all they know."

Mrs. Hoffman said a settlement in the strike does not seem imminent. There were no negotiations last week because union officials were attending the AFL-CIO national convention in Florida. An informal meeting was held yesterday with the hope of scheduling upcoming talks.

Money is the basic issue, according to union officials, and they are asking for an annual wage minimum of \$14,000. The drivers now make between \$9,500 and \$12,000. UCP has offered a 7 percent salary in

crease, and says it cannot offer more because of recent financial problems.

In addition to disrupting transportation of clients, Mrs. Hoffman said that the strike caused a minor disruption in laundry delivery last week at the Warner Center.

The delivery is usually made by the transportation workers, but because of the strike, UCP officials rented a truck, said Mrs. Hoffman.

"The deputy director of the facility drove the truck himself, and when he returned he was pulled out of the truck and pushed around — I don't think there were any punches thrown — but he was harassed by the strikers.

"We eventually got the linen delivered and we just left the truck there. The next morning we found all the tires slashed," she said.

"At that point, we called some of the parents of the clients and they were able to work out an agreement with the strikers about deliveries."

No problems have occurred since, she added.