

Admissions up, services down at South Beach

By DAN JANISON

Admissions to the South Beach Psychiatric Center have risen significantly since last year, helping push the number of patients there to "slightly" above capacity, a spokesman for the center said yesterday.

With a total bed capacity, or census, of 396 — including 24 for younger patients — the number of patients has hovered around the 400 mark, he said. In past years, South Beach has been "at census" or "slightly below."

Ira Kleiman, the spokesman, reported the trend after a member of the center's Board of Visitors publicly linked an increased need for inpatient care at the facility to a cutback earlier this year in outpatient services.

Testifying before the state Assembly Mental Health Committee, the board member, Annette Curtis-Williams, said "admissions from the outpatient programs are up 14 percent already" at South Beach.

One Staten Island outpatient program was shut down last spring, while two in Brooklyn were lost as a result of cuts and staff shakeups forced on the Ocean Breeze center and others in the state by budget officials, she noted.

Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, said insufficient staffing in state mental health facilities was contributing to creation of "a time bomb waiting to explode" and "a potential for death."

Dramatic testimony was heard during a six-hour hearing at the World Trade Center, from union representatives and others involved in the Manhattan Psychiatric Center who told of increased assaults by patients against other patients and against workers.

Several witnesses blasted a refusal by the state Division of Budget to release millions in funds that the Legislature had voted to restore to both the Office of Mental Health (OMH) and the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

Those included City Council President Carol Bellamy, who said, "Conditions at state hospitals in New York City today rival the Dickensian conditions of the 19th century."

Like others who addressed the committee, Ms. Bellamy tied the crisis in mental health care to that of the homeless, many of them "dumped" from state institutions in past years.

Mrs. Connelly expressed concern that a new homeless shelter at Sea View Hospital and Home could be targeted by state officials as a dumping ground for people who should be getting professional help.

She also said Richmond Memorial Hospital was interested in reopening the outpatient facility on its grounds that had been forced to shut down, but that the city — appealed to for assistance — was also financially strapped.

While OMH runs facilities like South Beach, OMRDD runs facilities such as the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), Willowbrook. The hearings were called to discuss patient-staff ratios at both types of facilities.

Tyrone Daniels, leader of the Civil Service Employees Association local that represents SIDC direct-care workers, spoke of a high level of worker "burnout" because of insufficient staffing.

Declining to reveal his sources, Daniels said 300 more direct-care workers are due to be "laid off" from the facility

Jan. 1. OMRDD chief Arthur Y. Webb did not deny or confirm the figure when subsequently asked about it by Mrs. Connelly. Webb said many staff reductions were the result of mandated placing of SIDC patients in community-based facilities.

Webb acknowledged many of the problems presented but called the austerity "temporary" despite fears of "retrenchment." He conceded during his testimony that when average staff-to-patient ratios of less than two to one are reported, they include all staff, from maintenance to security.

Daniels also presented computerized employee records showing dozens of SIDC direct-care employees having resigned "because they just couldn't take it any more." Last Saturday, for example, a staffer named Dorothy Williams was struck by one of the more troubled patients at Building 32 and injured, he said.

Mrs. Connelly said she hoped the hearings would serve as a "voice" for those affected.

No budget division officials testified. Mrs. Connelly said her committee had not specifically urged them to do so, but added that if matters do not improve, she would consider issuing subpoenas for their testimony.

For their part, aides to Gov. Mario M. Cuomo have said the restorations could not be made, in part because too many senior staffers in the mental health system took advantage of an early-retirement deal initially aimed at averting more layoffs.

An inpatient increase was widely predicted last spring when the cutbacks were enforced.

"When there is no time for an outpatient therapist to make home visits, no time to involve families in treatment, no time to advocate for patients' benefits, no time for therapeutic activity programs, outpatients become inpatients," Mrs. Williams of the South Beach board said in her testimony.

Kleiman confirmed the 14 percent figure quoted by Mrs. Williams, but said it should be put in a wider context.

He said that for the first six months of this year, compared to the first six months of last year, admissions showed a 6 percent increase overall.

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Out of that total, he said, there was a 14 percent increase in the number of patients admitted who had been in outpatient programs.

Austerity moves closed satellite centers and chopped 27, or 5 percent, of the South Beach staff, according to state officials. Of that figure, 12 percent was attributable to outpatient service reductions, it was noted.

Jerry Harawitz, political action coordinator for the Public Employees Federation local that includes OMH workers in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, said:

"The premise is wrong — you cannot do more with less in providing services for the mentally ill and mentally retarded. We are very concerned that if this level of reduction continues, no real treatment will be possible in any state facility."

Called as the first to testify before the committee, Dr. Steven Katz, the new OMH commissioner, was questioned about a possibly misleading practice reported to committee members.

"Teams" of state workers were sent into mental health centers prior to their inspection for accreditation by federal officials. Accreditation is required for Medicaid reimbursement from the federal government, explained Jim Clyne, an aide to the Assembly committee.

According to some reports, Clyne said, there was not only "sprucing up" done prior to the inspection but units were shifted around and staffs beefed up to show a different level of care than usual. After the inspection period, the employees would be shifted back to other facilities from which they were borrowed, he said.

OMH spokesman Robert Spoor, who was present at the hearing, told the Advance he had "no knowledge" that such major shifts took place.