

State official says homeless prefer the streets

B. DAN JANISON

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Most of the homeless prefer to be out on the street than fed and sheltered in public institutions, state Mental Health Commissioner Steven E. Katz said yesterday.

The controversial remarks were made at a budget hearing. They raised several eyebrows and were challenged by two lawmakers.

The commissioner had been invited to respond to an observation by Assembly Ways and Means Chairman Arthur Kremer, D-Nassau, that money for the homeless "seems to be going down the drain."

Katz also told lawmakers he was "frankly, not optimistic" that Gov. Mario M. Cuomo's proposed 1984-85 budget would provide for any growth in outpatient services.

South Beach Psychiatric Center was especially hard hit by 10 percent budget cuts in that area last year, which forced the closing satellite programs and pushed the number of inpatients there to capacity.

Because of its orientation toward community-based service, South Beach was the type of institution hardest hit statewide as direct-care levels in the big institutions were addressed, he acknowledged.

Mental health officials are taking "into consideration" a change in priorities to cover that gap in aid, Katz told Senate Finance Chairman John J. Marchi, R-Staten Island.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, pressed Katz on several issues.

"There is still a sense among providers of voluntary services that they are not involved at all" in the delivery of service, she said.

Katz responded that he does not hear complaints from these groups directly because they are reluctant to gripe while seeing his office as a pipeline to public funding. He also told Mrs. Connelly "there's no indication at this point" that research money will be restored to the budget.

After the hearing ended, Katz told the Advance he now expects the Legislature to get some results from its demands for more staff. A bill setting staff levels for mental health and other areas is now in the works.

But before the committee, Katz, who reports to Cuomo and is responsible for his mental health policies, was vague about whether he supports the Legislature's proposal to set specific staff levels.

"I would remain silent and not disagree" with the measure, he said.

"We can operate but it'll be marginal" under the current proposal, Katz said. "There's little room for growth."

Arthur Webb, Katz's counterpart in the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, last week urged lawmakers against such a move for his agency.

Expanding his remarks on the homeless, Katz said, "It's the American way. People are indoctrinated with the idea that freedom is better at any cost."

Citing results of a study in which 90 percent of the homeless interviewed said they did not want to go to shelters, Dr. Katz called it a social phenomenon that "emerged during the 1960's."

Civil liberties issues abound about requirements for admission to mental health facilities. The homeless and mentally ill are often linked, with Katz reporting yesterday that a third of the homeless have been found to have some form of mental illness.

Assemblyman Peter Grannis, D-Manhattan, said he was "concerned" about the position sounding like "Reagan" policies.

But Katz replied, "that really wasn't the point. I was trying to say that psychologically, they would rather see themselves as street people."

A "dramatic increase" in the number of people "going AWOL" (absent without leave) from psychiatric centers across the state, totaling 4,000 last year, was reported by Katz.

Three out of four of the patients were there voluntarily, and a fifth of them wind up getting themselves admitted to another hospital.

"Two or 3 percent of these elope," he said. "That would be less than 100."

"We're responsible for seeing that no one gets away who is any danger" to the public, Katz told the committee.