

Heckler: S.I. mental center is 'appalling'

Washington (Combined Dispatches)—Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler said yesterday that U.S. inspectors found "appalling" conditions at state-run institutions for the mentally retarded, including the Staten Island center formerly known as Willowbrook.

Testifying at a Senate subcommittee hearing, she said federal inspectors had visited 17 federally subsidized facilities last month and found substandard conditions at all of them. Complaints included fire violations, filth and excessive use of drugs to control patients.

"I find this situation appalling," she said.

In nine cases, "major health and safety deficiencies" were found, a few of them described as life-threatening, she said. Among the nine was the Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly Willowbrook, where deplorable conditions caused a major scandal in the 1970s.

The problems listed for Staten Island involved food, nutrition and comfort and privacy in the living areas. The department also said pharmacy services and physical and occupational therapy failed to meet federal standards.

Heckler said she will "double our surveillance activities"—adding more random surveys, giving states deadlines to fix problems,

cutting off funding if necessary to get compliance and intensifying inspector general audits.

"In all cases where substandard conditions were noted during the recent federal inspections, state Medicaid directors have been given 30 days to give us a firm, detailed plan for correcting those deficiencies within 180 days," Heckler told the Senate subcommittee.

"Failure to deliver an acceptable plan or inadequate implementation of that plan will result in termination of the facilities from the Medicaid program," she said.