

Complaints aired about center lunches

By JULIE MACK
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Mouse droppings, roaches and spoiled food are among the complaints about the box lunches supplied by Staten Island Developmental Center to more than 100 mentally retarded clients who attend the Community Training Center (CTC) in Mariners Harbor.

The complaints came from parents and CTC staff, who say clients are losing weight because they refuse to eat the lunches.

SIDC officials acknowledge the problem and said they hope to provide at least a temporary solution within a week.

But parents and the CTC staff say promises to address the situation in the past have not been honored. Indeed, staff and a parent at the center noted several problems with yesterday's lunch — ranging from stale bread to inappropriate food for one of the clients.

Marsha Rosenberg, head one of the SIDC's two kitchens — the kitchen in the former Warner complex — is under renovation and it may be difficult to increase capacity of the other kitchen, he said.

"Because of the renovation, we can't do what we'd like to do," he said. "But I don't like the idea of cold lunches."

Tierney said SIDC officials have been working on the problem for several weeks, and have even tried to contract with commercial vendors to provide hot lunches. The attempt was unsuccessful, Tierney said, because many clients have specialized dietary requirements and the lunches must be individually prepared.

"I think hot meals are the only solution here," Tierney said. "We'd have better quality control over lunches that could be prepared and served immediately."

"I hope to have an answer to this within the next few days, after I talk to my people. I want to deal with this issue in an immediate fashion."

John Giangioffe, a Brooklyn parent with a son at CTC, said he has observed a "drastic" decline in the quality of the lunches since SIDC took over. "My son loves to eat, but he just spits this food out," Giangioffe said. "These kids don't have anything going for them except a decent meal, and now they're not getting it."

Ms. Rosenberg said she has contacted the employee who supervises preparation of the lunches, who said the problems result from understaffing — at times, only one person is available to assemble all 120 box lunches, including many that must be individualized for patients on special diets.

"When this occurs, lunch preparation starts at 8 a.m. and is not completed by 1 p.m.," Ms. Rosenberg said in a memo. "When food stays unrefrigerated for this length of time, it is understandable how the food becomes spoiled." Such understaffing also leads to mistakes like sandwiches without filling, the memo said.

Ms. Rosenberg said the SIDC dietary department "tries to be very cooperative" and "our complaints have been receiving attention. But they always say they are trying to rectify the situation, but nothing ever happens."

Yesterday, Thomas Tierney, SIDC deputy director, and Robert Witkowsky, director of the buildings that once formed the Warner complex, visited CTC and agreed solutions were needed.

"I don't think the people here are out-of-line with their concerns," Tierney said.

He said the mouse droppings and roaches get into the lunch boxes when they are in storage, and then SIDC employees fail to clean them before putting in food. Other problems result from preparation of the lunches a day in advance, he said.

Tierney promised better staffing, and said he wants to start providing hot lunches for the clients as soon as possible — perhaps next week. Because there are no adequate kitchen facilities at CTC, those lunches would have to be prepared at SIDC and trucked to Mariners Harbor.

That won't be easy, because

nurse for CTC, which is operated by United Cerebral Palsy of New York State, picked a lunch at random yesterday and opened it for a reporter.

The meal was for an overweight client on a 1,200-calorie diet. The lunch included two jelly sandwiches, a package of cookies and cole slaw. "This is not a proper lunch for someone on a restrictive diet," Ms. Rosenberg said.

Until this year, UCP provided the clients with hot lunches because they lived at a UCP facility — the Karl Warner Center, a 300-bed complex on the grounds of SIDC.

But this spring, when UCP experienced financial problems, the state took over the center and responsibility for the lunches.

"Some of the clients don't get enough food," Ms. Rosenberg said. "At other times, we have found mouse droppings and roaches in the lunch boxes. There's been a problem with spoiled food. We've had situations where a patient gets a sandwich with no filling — just two pieces of bread."

"Because we sometimes have to throw the food out, it means the clients are not getting enough food."

According to Ms. Rosenberg's records, 43 patients have experienced a "severe weight loss." In a CTC memo Sept. 21, it was noted that five patients lost eight to 14 pounds in a month.