

SIDC probe claims abuse of patients

By JIM HUGHES
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At least 10 employees at the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) have been suspended on charges of patient abuse, while eight or more others have been charged with several violations including sleeping and drinking on the job, according to administration and union officials.

Many of the charges resulted from an undercover investigation by the state in which an agent posed as a member of the staff's housekeeping department, union officials said.

James Walsh, the executive director of the institution that cares for 600 mentally retarded patients, confirmed that "about a dozen" employees had been suspended. He said he could not comment on whether they were suspended with or without pay, or the reason for the suspensions.

Walsh confirmed that several of the charges stemmed from an undercover investigation, but would not confirm if the investigation was conducted by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

A spokeswoman at OMRDD, the parent agency of SIDC, also said she could not confirm

whether or not her agency conducted the investigation.

Walsh said he could not discuss any details about the charges because the cases will be going to arbitration — a procedure used to handle non-criminal charges — but said "it's not related to a particular thing, it involves several misconduct charges."

He also said of the suspensions, "It's normal to have these problems in any large corporation."

George Boncoraglio, regional president of the Civil Service Employees Association, said there were "a slew of charges," including sleeping and drinking on the job and patient abuse.

He said the union was officially notified of the charges over the past two weeks, and said there were a total of 20 to 23 notices of discipline filed against employees. Of these employees, he said about 10 were suspended, apparently on charges of patient abuse.

Because Boncoraglio and Walsh gave conflicting figures, it was not clear exactly how many employees were suspended. Boncoraglio said 10 were suspended, while Walsh said "about a dozen." The number of other employees who were charged was also not clear, and could range from eight to as many as 13. According to Boncoraglio's figures, as many as 13 were suspended. Walsh would not comment on the other charges.

Boncoraglio confirmed that many of the charges apparently resulted from the observations of an undercover state investigator posing as a member of the housekeeping department. He said the investigator apparently witnessed an employee party about two months ago that resulted in many of the charges.

An employee of SIDC, who spoke under the condition that his name not be used, said the party was held by members of the 3:15 to 11:45 p.m. shift in Building 10 of the complex for a member of the staff being transferred out of the building. He said employees from other buildings at SIDC also attended the party.

The employee said the investigators, including Walsh, raided the party, took pictures of the employees at the party and told the employees that they knew drugs were being used at the party.

Walsh said he could not confirm whether or not he was involved in the raid, but did say a party was observed and reported by administrators in the building.

The employee said the investigators also told the employees they had tape recordings of patients being abused. The employee also said the investigators apparently found beer cans, bottles and bags of clothes on a patio roof near Building 10.

The employee said most of the charges were brought against staff members who work on the 3:15 to 11:45 p.m. shift in Building 10. The building houses predominantly 25- to 50-year-old men, according to Walsh. Many of the men have the mental capacities of young children, the employee

said.

Boncoraglio said he did not know the specifics of the party or the details surrounding the charges of patient abuse.

He said under the procedures of the state investigation and the union contract, the 10 employees charged with patient abuse were immediately suspended.

Once the state investigation was completed, the formal charges against the 10 employees, as well as the other lesser charges, were sent to the union.

Boncoraglio said all the charges will be appealed within the next 14 days. He said under the union contract, the union has a right to bring each case to arbitration to see if the charges will stick or be dropped. He said, however, that not all of the cases will necessarily be brought to arbitration.

Boncoraglio said the union will conduct its own investigation, and if it appears the state has sufficient evidence against the employee, the union will recommend that the employee resign rather than go to arbitration.

"I'm sure there will be people losing their jobs, and if the state produces the evidence, they should lose their jobs," Boncoraglio said.

But the union president said from what he has learned so far, the undercover investigator apparently witnessed some instances of patient abuse early in the investigation. Nevertheless, the investigation apparently continued for some time even after these initial cases of abuse were observed, Boncoraglio said.

"What bothers me is that if they had an undercover person

who viewed the patient abuse, then the alleged abuse was apparently allowed to continue so they wouldn't blow the undercover investigation," Boncoraglio said.

As a result, the union president said he has doubts about the state's evidence and the methods of its investigation.

Meanwhile, the anonymous employee said he felt his fellow employees were being "railroaded without evidence."

The charges brought against the employees are not the first

patient-abuse or drug-related charges brought against SIDC employees. In May 1983, 13 employees were charged with selling drugs. In July 1984, another employee was charged with raping a retarded resident of the institution. In October 1981, an aide at the center was charged with beating a severely retarded patient. In October 1978, a therapy aide was charged with assaulting a patient. And in March 1978, 25 workers were fired because of poor attendance records.