

Patient found paralyzed after fall from window

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A profoundly retarded man from the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) is paralyzed from the waist down after either falling or leaping from a second-story window at the facility three weeks ago, the Advance has learned.

The patient, John Galletta, 35, was found at 6:30 a.m. Sept. 22 outside Building 7, officials said.

Louis Ganim, a spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), which is

investigating the incident, said the patient was taken to Bayley Seton Hospital, where he was listed in stable condition last night.

"At this point the only thing I can say is that it's under investigation," Ganim said.

Ganim said he had no additional information about Galletta and did not know if he was from Staten Island.

Building 7 had been in the process of closing for several months as part of the phaseout of SIDC. Twenty-two patients were in the building at the time, Ganim said.

The building was closed Sept. 30, he said, and its patients were transferred to group homes or other facilities statewide.

Ganim said it did not appear that the incident was directly related to the transfer of patients out of the building.

"It happened in the morning, before everyone had been awakened," he said. "There was no movement going on. Everyone was asleep."

Ganim said he could not comment on how many staff mem-

John Galletta
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Walsh said that 40 employees cut because of the phaseout worked their last day last week. The employees chose layoffs instead of transfers to other facilities in the state, he said.

Currently, there are 2.6 to 2.7 staff members for each of SIDC's 474 patients, Walsh said. This includes more than 600 direct-care personnel charged with feeding, clothing and other tasks, he said. Denying allegations that the staff is unfamiliar with transferred patients, Walsh said many employees of phased-out buildings follow their patients to new facilities.

"You must realize the employees here are long-term staff. They have been exposed to all levels of patients. It's not like you're bringing a person off the street," he said.

Layoffs are made only after a census reveals that patient population has fallen, Walsh said. Employees are cut six weeks after the census, he said.

Medical funds were nearly cut off from the SIDC after an inspection by federal health officials in February found shortcomings in numerous areas, including staffing. The threatened cutoff was rescinded after the SIDC hired more staff in certain areas and began other repair programs, according to Walsh.

Walsh said that although the staff must be cut, SIDC can hire in some areas that are found deficient. Other employees who are no longer considered necessary because of population decline are still laid off or transferred, he said.

The 1972 Willowbrook Consent Decree ordered SIDC, then called Willowbrook, to reduce its population from 5,343 patients to 250 and to transfer them to community housing.

SIDC last month, according to the serious incident that occurred at Galletta's injury is not the only nine months," he said. "It's the ratio now as we did in the last

source. On Sept. 9, an "aggressive" SIDC patient, who was transferred to the center's Richmond Complex as part of the phaseout, bit off part of another patient's ear, according to the source.

An official of the Consumer Advisory Board, which oversees patients without families, confirmed that the Sept. 9 incident occurred. The official also requested anonymity.

Because patients are being transferred to different buildings, many employees have been working with certain clients for only a short period, according to the source. He blamed the Sept. 9 incident on the staff's lack of experience with the aggressive patient.

Ganim said that he had no information on the attack. Laid-off workers and others have said recently that SIDC is understaffed and overburdened because of the phaseout.

But SIDC officials have defended their staffing, saying that reductions are proceeding according to the master plan that calls for the SIDC's closing in 1987.

James Walsh, director of SIDC, said such accusations were "absolutely not true."

"We have as high a staffing ratio now as we did in the last nine months," he said. "It's the highest and most enriched staff in the entire state."

bers were working in the building at the time and where they were when the incident occurred. A source close to the investigation, however, charged that three staff members who were on duty at the time have been put on administrative leave as a disciplinary measure.

The source, who asked to remain anonymous, said that Galletta was found "naked and in a frog-like position" outside the entrance to the building, directly under the second-story hall window. The window, located about 20 feet above ground, is 8 feet high and 4 feet wide and should have been locked at the time, the source said.

Galletta was conscious, but was unresponsive and couldn't move, according to the source, who said he was in touch with investigators and read a report on the incident.

Staff members who found Galletta called 911, but later canceled the call, the source said. They then took the victim to his bed, fed him tea, and called a doctor, who didn't arrive until an hour and half after Galletta was found, the source said. The doctor sent Galletta to Bayley Seton Hospital, where it was discovered that he had broken three vertebrae.

Galletta's injury is not the only serious incident that occurred at SIDC last month, according to the