

# 45 SIDC workers face loss of jobs in state cutback

By ANNE SILVERSTEIN

ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities is preparing to lay off about 290 employees statewide this fiscal year, including up to 45 Staten Island Developmental Center employees.

Between 200 and 350 jobs statewide are expected to be lost, said Lou Ganim, an OMRDD spokesman, but state officials remain "hopeful" that the jobs can be saved. But "we have to be upfront and say, 'There's this possibility. Let's work to stave off the prospect,'" he said. "We are going to do everything we can to reduce that number."

The layoffs are a result of a reduction in the number of clients now institutionalized, Ganim said, and are not directly related to SIDC's closing, which has been slated for several years now.

But, James Walsh, SIDC director, said he is optimistic that the layoffs will not occur, at least not at SIDC. The facility, he said, had its last staff reductions on March 11 when 96 employees left the facility either through voluntary or involuntary transfers, layoffs or retirement, Walsh said, leaving about 780 OMRDD employees Islandwide.

Prior to the March layoffs, SIDC had 585 employees, and OMRDD Island programs employed another 285 people, Ganim said.

"These 780," with few exceptions, "they're all going to have jobs," Walsh said. "I had my last reduction in my workforce on March 11." Within the year, said Walsh, who is also in charge of OMRDD programs on the Island, more people may be hired to work in state-funded community programs and in group homes.

Some people — the few exceptions — Walsh explained, hold jobs that will not be filled when those employees leave their positions.

In the March layoffs, said Willamay Thompson, an SIDC recreational therapist and the president of Local 280 of the Public Employees Federation, 27 union members lost their jobs.

She and other union leaders met with OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Webb on Feb. 12 and he told them to expect a reduction of between 45 to 60 jobs across the board in union and non-union OMRDD jobs on Staten Island during this fiscal year. About half of those jobs would be PEF employees, Ms. Thompson said.

So far, although she has heard nothing officially to contradict that information, she also has heard that those figures are too high. "If they do it, they'll be denying services to the clients," she said. All but 11 of PEF's 150 members who work for OMRDD on Staten Island also live here.

The unions, throughout the closing process, have worked closely with OMRDD, Ganim said. In fact, OMRDD is using the "Staten Island experience" as a model for "the kinds of things we're doing in other places," he said, referring to the closing of five other developmental centers.

At one time, Willowbrook State School employed for than 4,000 staffers making it the largest employer at the time on Staten Island. During the last three years, SIDC staff has been reduced by 1,425, Walsh said, as the census decreased in compliance with the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree.

The decree was the court-ordered settlement in a class action filed in 1972 on behalf of clients in SIDC, then known as Willowbrook State School. Part of the settlement called for placing the institution's residents in group homes.

The reductions in SIDC staffing have been contained in part because of the state's efforts to transfer, reassign or find jobs for staff in other state agencies, including the Office of Mental Health, and in other parts of the state, Ganim said. Others chose to retire or resign, so some jobs were phased out through attrition.

Still others were or will be assigned to community programs on the Island, Ganim said. For example, residents are and will be moving into the Richmond Complex, a set of group homes on SIDC's grounds, and will continue to need round-the-clock supervision as well as programming.

The reason many former SIDC employees found work, Walsh said, is when the clients were transferred from SIDC, jobs were created elsewhere in the system. "We didn't need the staff," he said, but other facilities did. The decree created state jobs, Walsh said, because it takes more staff to run small group homes.

Ganim, however, said one reason layoffs might be necessary is because it takes less staff to run the community programs despite the increase of clients in these programs. "We can't take care of all developmental center employees through community programs. There just aren't enough jobs," Ganim said.