

Cops to start landfill search for Downs girl

By LAURA BRUNO
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Police said they will finish searching the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook today for a 12-year-old Westerleigh girl missing since last Thursday and plan to begin looking through parts of the Fresh Kills Landfill.

More than 60 police officers and 40 civilians yesterday continued the search for Jennifer Schweiger, who suffers from Down's syndrome.

"More volunteer searchers would be appreciated," said Sgt. Joseph Monahan, who last night was stationed in the 24-hour command post set up in the Westerleigh firehouse on Jewett Avenue. Volunteers are asked to report to the post at 875 Jewett Ave.

"When 100 percent (of the community) respond, that might be enough," said Glenna O'Hare, a volunteer from Willowbrook. "Whatever it takes."

Though reported sightings of the child so far have been unfounded, police are checking all leads that come through on the confidential 24-hour hotline number, 447-4168.

Authorities also are tracking



Jennifer Schweiger

leads on the man they believe is mildly mentally retarded who was seen walking with Jennifer on the Willowbrook grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), said Capt. William Wallace, the borough's commanding officer of detectives.

By the time thunderstorms started flooding the Island around 4 p.m. yesterday, investigators again had thoroughly searched the SIDC grounds, including the steam pipe tunnels and underground walkways connecting the buildings, he said. Though "our efforts are hampered by the rain," Wallace said, police persisted in the round-the-clock search.

Jennifer and the man — about 60, 5 feet 11 inches tall, thin and with a bald spot on the back of his head — were seen by employees of the facility for the developmentally disabled about 3:30 p.m. Thursday.

Neighbors saw her shortly before 3 p.m. on Jewett Avenue, two blocks from her Wardwell Avenue home. A little past 2:30 p.m., Jennifer told her mother that she was going for a walk around the corner and would be back within the hour.

She is 4 feet 3 inches tall, weighs 65 pounds, has brown hair and hazel eyes. She was wearing a pink "Sesame Street" T-shirt, rubber sandals, pastel shorts and was carrying a bright yellow leather

shoulder bag.

Since her disappearance, "we've made at least two complete searches of the (SIDC) grounds and we've been through at least half a dozen times," Wallace said.

Police also "re-canvassed the neighborhood — we went door-to-door again," said Officer William Bradley at the command post.

Among the volunteers who joined the search yesterday were 27 New York Telephone Co. employees, co-workers of Kenneth Schweiger, 40, Jennifer's father who has been on leave from his Manhattan job during the ordeal.

"We've had the continuing participation of about 40 people a day," Wallace said. The Radio Emergency Associated Citizens Team, R.E.A.C.T., has assisted in the search, as well.

Fliers with the girl's picture that ask "Have you seen Jennifer?" are taped on the doors of neighborhood commercial establishments.

The community is concerned, and some members have been worried enough to join the search party.

Mrs. O'Hare, who attends Holy Family R.C. Church in Westerleigh with the Schweigers, said Jennifer "is just the most beautiful child, a darling child... beautifully taken care of. I just know her from having seen her."

"I would respond to any child's plight like this," she said. Although Mrs. O'Hare has three children of her own, empathy didn't motivate her to volunteer.

"In a situation like this, any person, any human being would have to respond," she said. "I don't think it has to do with your set of circumstances. It touches everyone's heart." Her 19-year-old son, Ed, also came out to help.

Lola Braisted's daughter used to take special education classes with Jennifer. Although the West Brighton mother hadn't seen the missing girl in several years, Mrs. Braisted remembered Jennifer as "a very warm, nice kid, friendly. She knew things she liked to do and things she didn't like to do — she had a mind of her own."