

Inside the maze of SIDC tunnels

Homeless reports unfounded

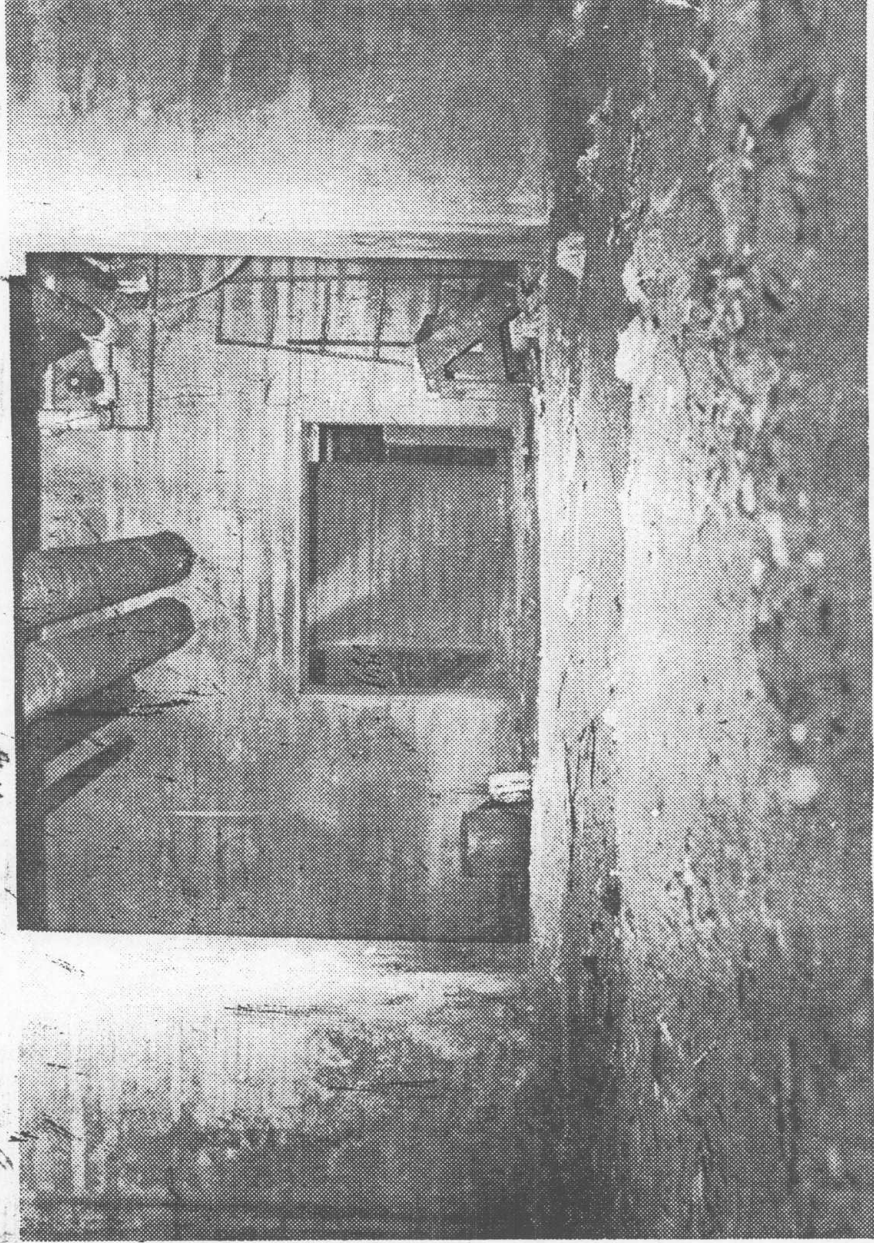
By LAURA BRUNO
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Scouring the Staten Island Developmental Center grounds hasn't led investigators to Jennifer Schweiger, but the search has spurred rumors that a group of homeless occupy the center's abandoned buildings and tunnels.

The official word, as well as that from SIDC workers and a homeless man who lived for the past few months in an old building there, is that three homeless people, at most, have stayed on the grounds in recent years.

But the cavernous buildings and subterranean passageways — especially the steam tunnels in the winter — would be a haven for street people in need of shelter, and a few observers still contend

(See TUNNELS, Page A 8)



ADVANCE PHOTO/STEVE ZAFFARANO

The entrance to the underground steam tunnel maze at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Tunnels

(From Page 1)

that droves of homeless people lived there.

One of the "definite" homeless people on the premises, a transient who lived for the past few years in a makeshift campsite in the woods, matches the description of the man last seen with 12-year-old Jennifer, a Down's Syndrome child from Westerleigh, when she disappeared July 9. Authorities have said the same man may be connected with the disappearances of three other Staten Island children.

"We were the only two (homeless people) I know of who stayed" on the SIDC grounds, said a homeless man, referring the transient questioned by police and himself, a former client of the center for the developmentally disabled.

Including the transient believed to have been walking with Jennifer on the SIDC grounds, "I only know of three cases where people were living there," said Louis Ganim, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation-Developmental Disabilities which oversees the center. James Walsh, SIDC director, was out of town on business yesterday and could not be reached for comment.

Reports — which made their way onto recent radio and TV news broadcasts — of "hundreds" of homeless people occupying

SIDC buildings and tunnels "just are not true," Ganim said.

Though he admitted the 382 acres are fairly accessible to those not worried about ticks, thorns or poison ivy, "in terms of homeless people that has not been the case," he said.

A visit last night to some of the buildings, steam tunnels and walkways revealed little evidence that the abandoned structures were used as homes, but volunteer searchers earlier had turned up mattresses, pieces of clothing, beer cans and coolers of food.

The findings prompted speculation that vagrants must be living at the center, and as the investigation revealed a complex web of underground tunnels, the reported numbers rose.

Steam tunnels, roomy enough to walk through, and sewer canals link all the buildings, and walkways connect each of two former kitchens with old residence halls. The transient questioned by police reportedly spent winters inside one of the kitchens, Building 18, and was familiar with access points to all the passageways.

Detectives are continuing to search the walkways and tunnels, but report that so far they haven't seen much to indicate the presence of vagrants.

Donna Cutugno, a volunteer searcher with The Friends of Jen-

nifer group, said it appears that "maybe about a half-dozen people" lived in the abandoned buildings. She didn't see evidence indicating vagrants in the tunnels.

If there were large numbers of homeless living on the grounds before Jennifer's disappearance, they have not yet surfaced in other communities on the Island.

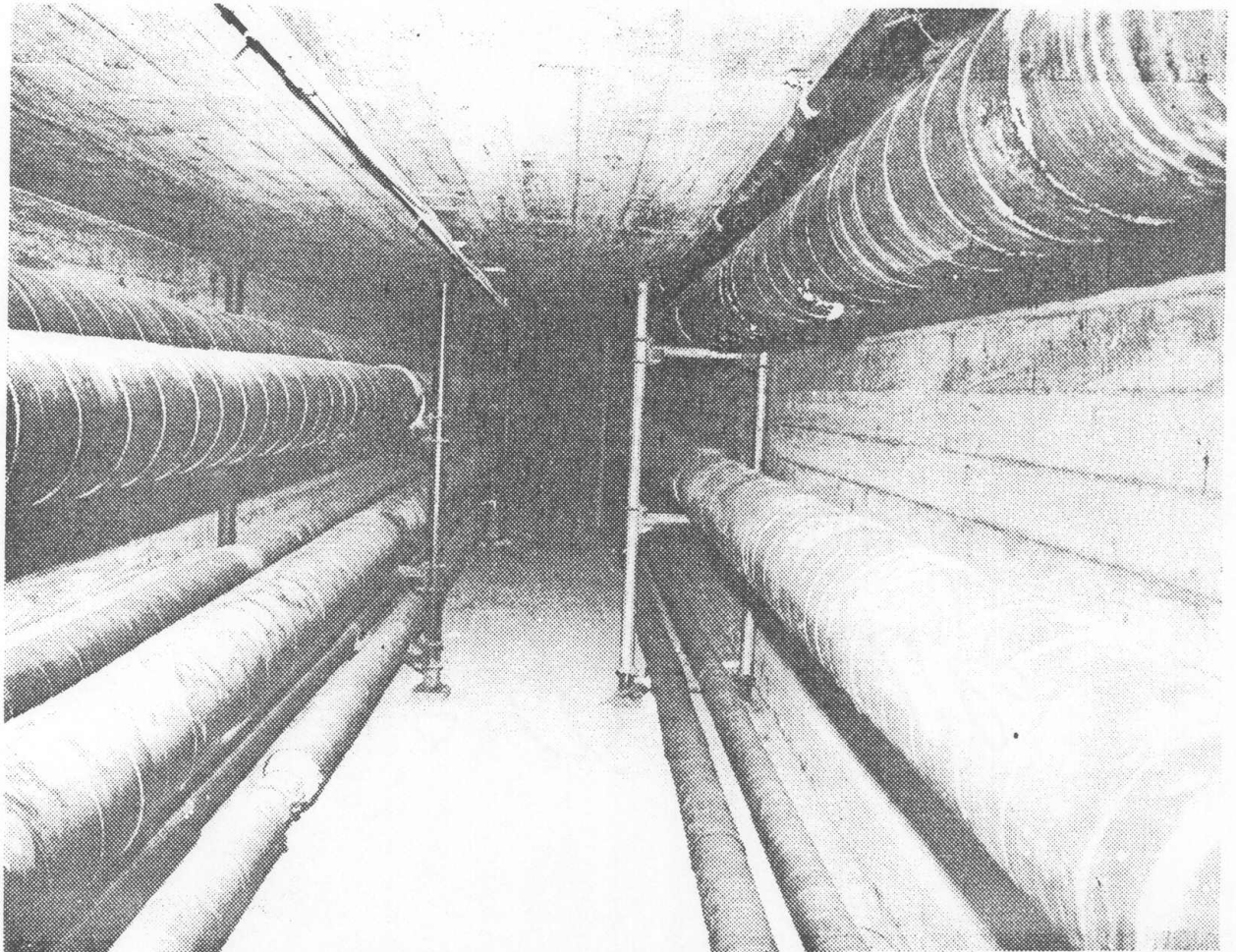
They have not checked in at Project Hospitality, the St. George-based organization that serves homeless Islanders, according to Terry Troia, director.

"I do not know of homeless people living there on the (SIDC) premises," she said. The not-for-profit group has dealt with homeless mentally retarded people who used to be clients of SIDC or its infamous predecessor, the Willowbrook State School, she said.

Ms. Troia would not discount the possibility that homeless people have sought shelter on the grounds.

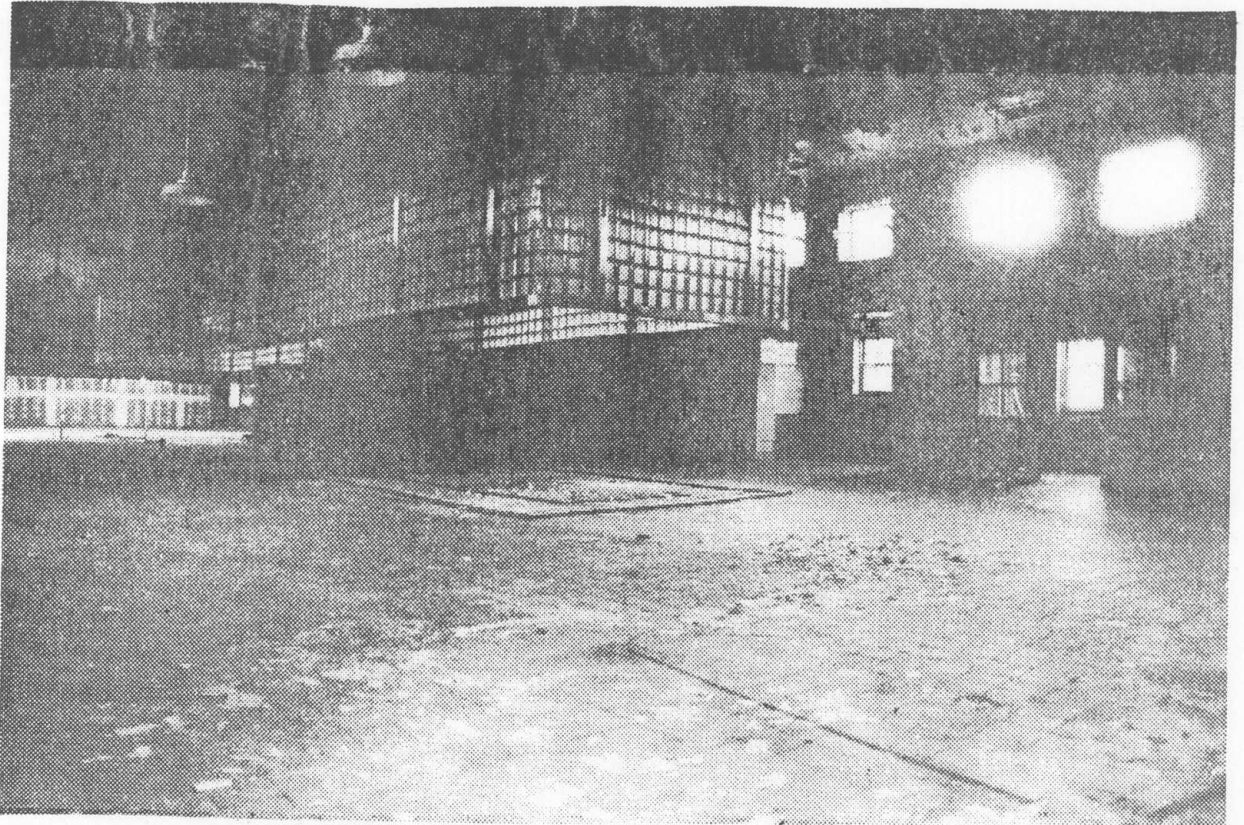
"Just because we don't know about them, doesn't mean they haven't been there," especially in the winter, she said. "It's a possibility."

About 100 former SIDC clients still reside legitimately in buildings, Ganim said, but they will be relocated to a group-home development on the grounds this fall when the College of Staten Island takes over the property.



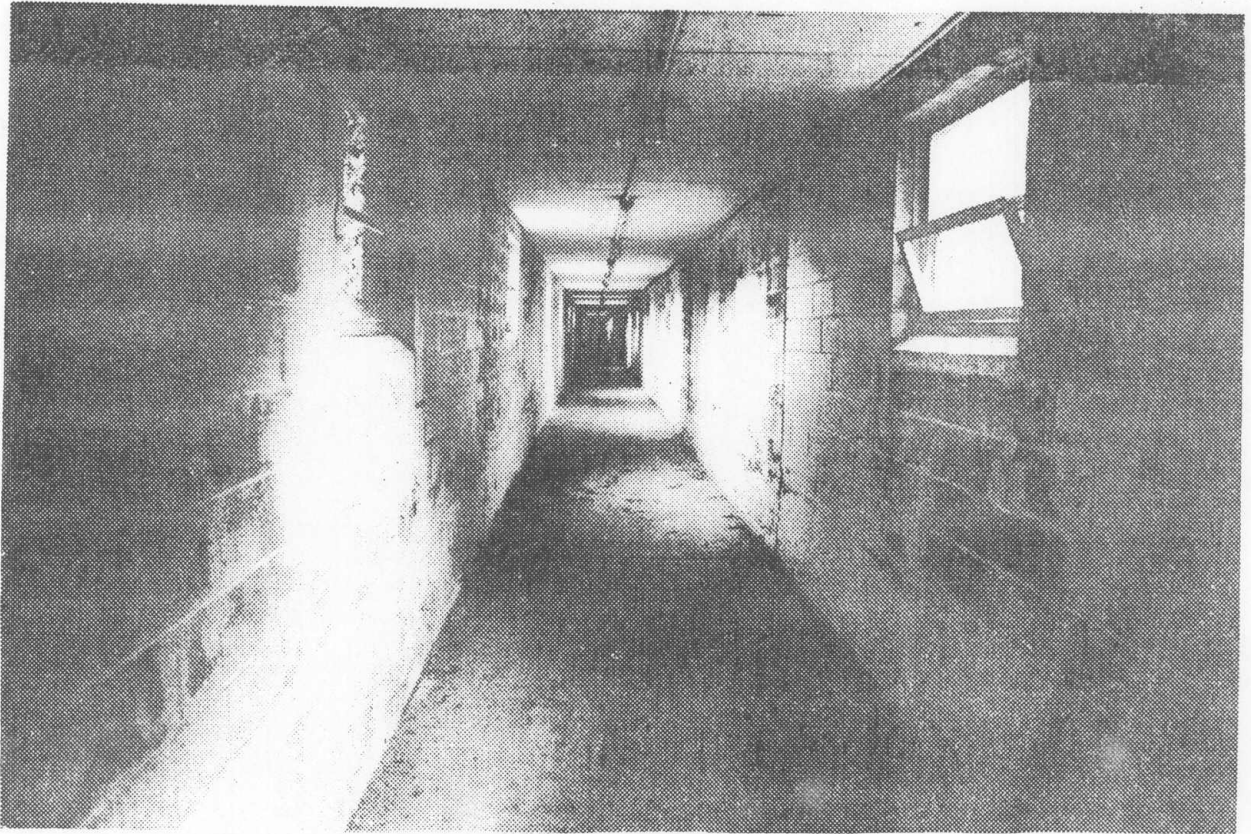
One of the underground tunnels that connect the buildings at the center.

Page 3 of 4



The kitchen in Building 18 at the center.

ADVANCE PHOTOS / STEVE ZAFFARANO



A tunnel from the kitchen to one of the buildings that formerly housed patients.