

# 8 state mental health workers to lose jobs on Staten Island

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ALBANY — Eight state employees who work with the mentally retarded on Staten Island will be out of jobs due to massive layoffs planned for September.

The job losses will force the closing of the neurovirology laboratory at the Institute for Basic Research (IBR) at Willowbrook. IBR is the only facility in the state devoted solely to researching mental retardation and developmental disabilities issues.

Five positions at IBR will be eliminated. Three workers at the Staten Island Development Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO) also will be out of work.

Statewide, 322 positions will be dissolved from among all OMRDD facilities and the agency's administrative offices. The retrenchment is attributed to cutbacks in OMRDD's budget because of state money problems. Gov. Mario M. Cuomo and the Legislature agreed to shave positions to help balance the state budget.

Equally important is the state's cancellation of plans to add 123 beds to OMRDD community residences this year. That means 400 vacant positions will not be filled this fiscal year.

A pathologist, research scientist, two laboratory technicians and a histology technician will be out of jobs at IBR.

"We just got the bad news yesterday," said Henry Wisniewski, director of IBR. "I consider these positions very important. It will have a negative impact on our diagnostic abilities."

IBR has 246 state-supported positions and a \$15 million budget. Its staff does research to help find medical cures for autism, Down's Syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome and Alzheimer's disease, among others.

"In our area, it's very difficult to get specialists. These positions are vital because they are in support services," Wisniewski said.

During a telephone interview, he said he was just about to notify the affected employees. He said he was hoping he could transfer the specialists to other departments within IBR.

OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Y. Webb issued 11 memo on July 11 to all OMRDD workers about the work-force reductions, tentatively scheduled for completion by Sept. 20. He also met with Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton, on Tuesday regarding the layoffs.

"Achieving a reduction in the size of our work force is without a doubt one of the most difficult aspects of being commissioner. There is never an easy way to accomplish it," Webb said in the memo.

Webb said in the past the agency was able to avoid layoffs during tight fiscal times through attrition, along with transfers to other state departments.

"Last year's sudden downturn in the state's fiscal fortunes and the continued fiscal problems this year do not allow us the luxury of that slower, less onerous method," he said.

The Staten Island DDSO will lose three positions: a deputy director for community services, chief of treatment service and a

radiologic technologist. Director Robert Witkowski was unavailable for comment yesterday.

"It's going to be tough," Mrs. Connelly said. "I think it will have an effect on services. It's going to be an unhappy summer."

She was particularly concerned with at least a one-year delay in adding community beds to the system. The whole purpose of the Willowbrook Consent decree was to move clients from large institutions to community facilities.

Mrs. Connelly said Staten Island didn't get hit as hard as the developmental centers in other parts of the city. OMRDD is chopping 27 positions at the Manhattan developmental office, 21 in Brooklyn and 55 in the Bronx.

State union officials said they hope most of the affected workers will get transferred to other jobs within OMRDD or the Department of Mental Health. George Boncoraglio, New York City president of the Civil Service Employees Association, and a Westleigh resident, said it is not uncommon to switch workers to other facilities or other departments.

The CSEA represent workers in OMRDD and Mental Health facilities. He noted that workers about to lose their jobs at the Institute of Basic Research, for example, could fill a position at South Beach Psychiatric Center, which is under the Mental Health agency.

"We will probably be able to place most people at different facilities in the city," Boncoraglio said.