

Were politics behind layoffs of state workers?

By Barbara Naness

Patronage and politics are *not* behind the layoffs of some 322 state employees, according to the State Department of Civil Service and the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), the agency slated to lose the positions due to budget cuts.

The layoffs, scheduled to take place on Sept. 20, directly affect eight Staten Islanders presently employed at the Institute for Basic Research in Developmental Disabilities (IBR) and Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (DDSO). And, while the majority of those whose jobs will be eliminated are expected to be relocated at other OMRDD facilities, opponents of the cutbacks claim the move could set in motion a snowball effect as those with less seniority are "bumped."

In addition, they contend, all of the positions being eliminated are in the competitive class, while noncompetitive, exempt and labor-class titles are not affected at this time.

According to the Organization of NYS Management Confidential Employees (OMCE), which represents the senior level clinicians affected (chief of services, deputy director for community services and pathologist at IBR and DDSO), "OMRDD wishes to politicize this professional position. 'Clients come first' will be replaced by 'what is more popular, cheaper, more expedient, current'."

There will, claims OMCE, be a shift from "service to clients" to "how to prevent fallout from the marginal delivery of service." In addition, the layoff of these permanent, civil service employees, who have been appointed on the basis of competitive testing, will put an end to the concept of the "career

ladder" and allow for discretionary appointments with "no standards."

"We don't accept the fact that these positions are not needed," said OMCE President Barbara Zaron. "These are people who are directly responsible for the care of the developmentally disabled. Many of them have been working for a long time in their positions...positions they've gotten through competitive testing. Under the civil service law, they have some rights."

For the last 10 years, Zaron told the *Register*, OMRDD has been reclassifying some competitive job titles in the noncompetitive and exempt classes.

Referring to Zaron's contention as "wrong" and "shortsighted," Civil Service spokeswoman Lois Uttley explained that there has also been a "steady increase in the number of competitive positions. The percentage of positions other than competitive has remained constant since 1984, she maintained.

More than 80 percent of state titles are competitive, Uttley said; of those, less than four percent are provisionals. In addition, 12.7 percent are noncompetitive, 1.4 percent are exempt and 5.2 percent are in the labor class. Only those jobs in the exempt and labor classes are considered discretionary, Uttley added, since noncompetitive jobs require candidates' qualifications to be measured against agency standards.

Critics, however, claim the announced layoffs are part of a long-range plan to slowly replace competitive titles with discretionary ones. The state civil service system, they maintain, will eventually mirror that of New York City, where, through a variety of methods including the widespread use of patronage and proliferation of discretionary titles, the system is being subverted and undermined. Uttley dismissed allegations that the state is attempting to politicize OMRDD.

"The governor," Uttley ex-

plained, "is a strong advocate for the merit system. And [Civil Service] Commissioner [Walter] Broadnax strongly believes in testing. Because of this commitment, the numbers show that most of the jobs in the state are competitively tested for."

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Uttley added that it is equally "unlikely" that OMRDD itself is attempting to subvert the system. "OMRDD decided which jobs were to be eliminated based on programmatic concerns," she told the *Register*.

"Determining which positions were to be eliminated," concurred OMRDD spokesman Louis Ganim, "was based on a process of determining which positions we can operate without because of the changing structure of the system. The positions are the issue, not who holds them."

A state employee, who asked to remain anonymous, told the *Register* politicization would prove, in the future, to have been a factor in this year's layoffs. "They are eliminating only competitive civil service titles," the employee explained. "And, while they won't be replaced by discretionary people right away, this gives them the opportunity to bring in more discretionary people in the future...people who serve at the pleasure of the appointing authority...not right away, but a year or two from now."

OMRDD's goal, according to Ganim, was to eliminate the affected positions through attrition, as has been done in the past. But with the move away from institution-based care and the increase in community-based facilities, he said, it became clear there would be some positions that would have to be cut. "As it is," Ganim noted, "OMRDD has avoided about 60 additional layoffs originally anticipated for this year. Last year