

Hundreds join search party looking for missing woman

By THOMAS CHECCHI
and BRUCE ALPERT

Police intensified the search yesterday at the Staten Island Developmental Center for Ethel L. Atwell, the 46-year-old mental hygiene therapist who disappeared Tuesday morning.

Twenty police officers, five civilian volunteers on horseback, 500 center employees and several Staten Island detectives searched the center's grounds and the surrounding area throughout the day.

Staten Island Police Chief Patrick Murphy and Capt. Nicholas Drakos,

commanding officer of the 122nd Precinct, New Dorp, coordinated the search of the 382-acre campus.

Drakos explained that the Willowbrook grounds have been divided into 16 areas, with a police officer assigned to each one. Center workers report to a temporary police headquarters in Building 47 and are sent to the different areas to continue the search under police supervision, he said.

Mrs. Atwell, who was described as 5 feet 5 inches tall, weighing 156 pounds and wearing a long blue coat and black shoes, was last seen by her mother when she left her home in Newark at 5:30 a.m. Tuesday.

Mrs. Atwell reportedly arrived at work and parked her car behind Building 47.

There were reports yesterday that a woman living nearby heard screams and voices coming from the lot shortly after 6 a.m. Tuesday. She said she heard a woman's frightened voice yelling. "I won't go with you. . . You'll hurt me." Then she said she heard screams, which prompted a search by fellow workers.

The workers found only Mrs. Atwell's car and some of her belongings.

According to Detective Anthony Verrilli of the Crimes Against Property Squad, the efforts yesterday, which included a second police helicopter search, turned up "a few clues."

Some articles of clothing were found, including a woman's underpants, but Verrilli said police have not yet determined if the panties belonged to Mrs. Atwell.

Drakos said the area of the search has been widened. "We are now looking in all areas, including the grounds of the Institute for Basic Research and Willowbrook Park," he said.

He said police are also conducting bottom-to-top searches of the center's buildings.

Verrilli said one of the first places searched was the site where the body of Shin Lee, a nurse at the center, was found strangled and buried in a shallow grave Aug. 6. Police have arrested no suspects in that case.

"Mrs. Atwell is the same age as the nurse, and she has a similar occupation. We thought there might be a pattern developing, but we were somewhat relieved to find nothing there," Verrilli said.

Since Mrs. Lee's death, workers at the center have complained of poor lighting on the grounds and a lack of security.

Center officials conceded Tuesday that security is lacking. Elin Howe, director of the 2,200-bed facility, said that since the nurse's murder, administrators have tried to improve security, but "it is still not what it should be."

In response to recent incidents of violence at the center, Felton King, president of the 3,500-member Civil Services Employees Association Chapter at the center, said he is scheduling a demonstration at Gov. Carey's midtown Man-

hattan office to demand increased security at the institution for the retarded.

He said the administration has not responded to repeated requests for improved lighting and security.

"There is no protection for the employees, and if there is none for employees, God knows there is none for the residents," King said.

King issued the statement from the Concord Hotel, a Catskill resort, where the CSEA is having a statewide convention.

Verrilli, meanwhile, said the search for Mrs. Atwell would continue today. "Due to the circumstances, we're pretty convinced that there's something here," he said.

He asked that anyone with information concerning Mrs. Atwell's disappearance call 727-4200, or the 24-hour number, 979-4633. Police said all information will be kept confidential.



Ethel Atwell