

Plymouth staff paints grim picture of work, at home for retarded

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

"It's a dirty job," said a spokesman for the Plymouth Center for Human Development.

Psychologists and Plymouth center spokesmen agree that being an attendant to severely-retarded children is frustrating and could lead to cases of abuse.

"The day shift gets there at 6 a.m. and they're taking care of residents who can't take care of themselves," said Peter Schweitzer, a spokesman for the Plymouth center.

"They're changing diapers all day—sometimes for adult-aged people. That's not what I would consider a very pleasant job."

In Molloy Hall, one of the halls mentioned in a Detroit Free Press series, he said he knew at least one attendant was the brunt of repeated racial slurs from residents. "I don't know if anyone could go in and face it for eight hours a day," Schweitzer said.

WHILE SOME Plymouth center officials and Michigan Department of Mental Health officials try to downplay the abuse charges, others have said many factors may have contributed to the problem, including:

- "The frustrating nature of the job."
- "Civil service 'requirements' which allow anyone able to pass the civil service examination to be hired as an attendant."

- "Inadequate administrative intervention in the early stages."
- "A system which condoned, and may have even supported, abuse as 'the way things were done.'"

"BEING AN attendant is damn tough," said Dr. Alan Glaros, professor of psychology at Wayne State University. "It's terribly depressing, very frustrating."

"They may be very, very profoundly retarded. They may be so retarded that they'll choke on food unless they're watched very carefully. It's very hard to function in a situation like that."

Glaros said there is a higher chance of abusive behavior in custodial institutions than in treatment institutions.

"Making sure everybody gets to eat, gets washed, gets dressed and gets to sleep—that's what a custodial institution is all about," he said.

The attendants in Molloy and Binet halls, some of whom allegedly did the beating, are responsible for these "custodial" functions.

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—Peter Schweitzer, Plymouth Center for Human Development

"In 2 1/2 hours, these attendants have to have eight residents awake, washed, dressed, fed and on school buses," Schweitzer said. "And that's on a good day, when everybody is in. There's no mother in the U.S. who has to do that. I'd describe it as an impossible task."

Glaros said the frustration could provoke some attendants to beat the children.

TO MINIMIZE the frustration, Glaros suggested that experienced personnel be hired as attendants.

"What you need are people with the training and experience with these types of kids. You might need PhD-level people. You might need a real training program, not a two-week, 'here's-how-we-do-it-here' orientation."

"We're just going to have to cop out the some dough," Glaros said.

PRESENTLY, attendants are required only to be 18 years of age and pass a civil service exam. There are no educational requirements.

However, Joseph McCall, a spokesman for the state Department of Mental Health, said this is not the root of the problem.

"Professional training has very little to do with being cruel," he said.

"To base it upon education is not a very fair way to go. To say that people with less education are more prone to beating or abusing children—there's just nothing to back that up."

"What we have to do is weed those bad ones and get them out of contact with the residents."

The Free Press, however, reported that Dr. William Womack, the center's former superintendent, said his hands were tied by civil service regulations "which were more employee-oriented than resident-oriented."

Womack yesterday voluntarily was re-assigned to the Michigan Department of Health's central office in Lansing.

Glaros supported that contention: "They need the flexibility to get rid of people who are really bad with kids."

"I bet they're right; they can't get rid of the abusers. A verbal complaint by a child isn't enough. A bruise isn't enough," Glaros said.

STATE SEN. Robert Geake (R-Northville), who was once an administrator at the Plymouth center, pointed to administrative weakness as a factor.

Geake, however, would not comment further until a special department of mental health report had been reviewed by Gov. Milliken.

"The whole situation is very clear," said one psychologist who wished to remain anonymous. "The people who abused the children weren't punished. They weren't relieved of duty. Nothing happened."

PSYCHOLOGISTS would not rule out the possibility that mentally disturbed people were employed as attendants.

"Some of them may have been beaten as children. Some of them may beat their own children," Glaros said.

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