

POLK SUPERINTENDENT FIRED

Secretary of Public Welfare Helene Wohlgemuth today fired Dr. James H. McClelland, Superintendent of Polk State School and Hospital for the mentally retarded, Venango Co., effective May 1st. She designated Dr. Wesley D. White, superintendent of White Haven State School and Hospital, Luzerne county, as acting superintendent of Polk, effective immediately.

The dismissal followed an unannounced visit to Polk by Mrs. Wohlgemuth on Saturday, April 14, 1973, accompanied by Mrs. Harry Clapp, President of PARC and Deputy Secretary Norman J. Taylor.

"In the Meadowside Building, in a women's day room, was a cage made of wooden slats with a small door and a padlock. The cage was about 5' x 5' x 5' and inside sitting on the floor was a woman," the Secretary said. "It is incomprehensible in this day and age that human beings should be subjected to such degradation and dehumanization." She continued, "In the men's ward, I saw men in 'play pens'; the pens are also about 5' high, more a corral in order that they not roam from the building. A man sat in a large crib with a closed top so that he could not stand--there were three such cribs in a row in one men's ward. This is the epitomy of dehumanization. Had we found such conditions in an interim care facility, we should have closed it on the spot."

In a letter, hand delivered to McClelland today, Mrs. Wohlgemuth listed the reasons for the action as:

- "1. The cruel, degrading, and inhumane conditions which I

personally observed during my visit on April 14, 1973. This refers specifically to the locked "cages" and pens in which you authorized the confinement of patients.

2. Severe and chronic deficiencies with respect to the proper training and orientation of professional and non-professional staff in the appropriate care and treatment of mentally retarded residents."

The Secretary pointed out that Dr. McClelland was eligible for retirement under the State employment system and had been offered the option to resign but refused.

"I think it's recognized that all of our state schools and hospitals have problems of overcrowding and inadequate staff," said the Secretary, "but none has seen fit to resort to methods like these.

"Unfortunately, Polk is a large institution...one of the largest. No matter how rapidly we move to reduce the patient population, we are still going to be faced with tremendous problems. The only immediate answer is to provide a change in leadership, to assure that the treatment and programs at Polk are quickly corrected," Mrs. Wohlgemuth said.

Mrs. Wohlgemuth said that Norman J. Taylor, Deputy Secretary, western region, had delivered the letter to McClelland this morning and was on hand at the hospital to supervise, and brief the staff. Dr. White will arrive tomorrow to begin a thorough study of Polk policies and procedures, and to recommend and make changes in the facility's operations. A team of experts will also be sent to the facility to evaluate and recommend changes in structure, programming, and staff training.

To alleviate understaffing, 629 additional personnel have been added at Polk since the Shapp administration took office in January, 1971. Under the provisions of Senate Bill 55, another 250 would be allocated.

"Unfortunately, institutions like Polk are so large that it is impossible to keep a constant check on the conditions that exist. I have notified the superintendents of all of the department's facilities that conditions such as these will not be countenanced. I will continue to make spot visits to the various institutions in the state," Secretary Wohlgemuth said.