

State hospital security tighter

By KEN KOVACS

Township officials claim residents are living in "fear and paranoia" of escapees from Northville Regional Psychiatric Hospital.

Hospital officials say their patients have not been involved in any serious incidents off the grounds in many months.

The fact is that the number of walkaways and "unauthorized leaves", as the hospital prefers to call them, have decreased significantly from last year.

Members of a hospital Security Advisory Board at the hospital were presented with comparative figures for each month in 1978 and 1979 at the

group's monthly meeting November 30. In November alone the combined number of reported walkaways and persons on "unauthorized leaves" found off the grounds of the hospital is down 24 from November, 1978.

October and September comparisons show a similar decline of 31 and 26, respectively.

Jack Wutrich, a security consultant for the hospital, said he felt the current figures — 32 in October and 40 in November — indicate great improvement.

"I don't think slightly over one a day is a bad record for an open campus hospital like this," he said.

State Senator Robert Geake, another member of the committee, did not

agree. "I think it is a terrible record," he stated. "And I think a fence around three sides of the hospital would bring the number of walkaways down even more."

"We have made some progress but we have a long way to go," the senator said.

Township officials are judiciously pushing for the erection of a fence at the hospital and Senator Geake has been aiding them at the state level.

One major roadblock in the township's bid for the fence, Geake said, is a letter sent by the Citizens Advisory Commission at the hospital.

The 12-member committee recently sent a letter to Senator Geake stating

that it was adamantly opposed to any such fence at the hospital.

At a meeting November 26 the chairman of the committee, Kay Woods, reaffirmed her stand.

"A fence is the most regressive thing to mental health that I can think of," she stated.

The committee, according to Ms. Woods, has not dealt with the fence issue except to respond to the request for an opinion on the proposal.

The committee, formed in 1978 following the Plymouth Center reports of abuse, is concerned more with the treatment of the patients and their well-being, though they also deal with community-related issues, Ms. Woods said.



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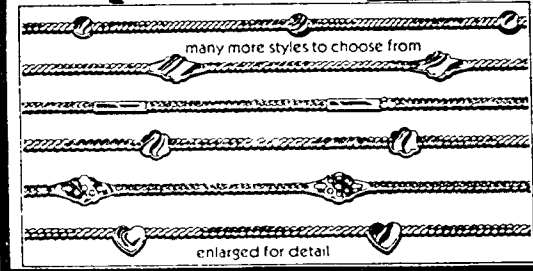
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Locker search has legal base

Continued from 4-A

issued an informal opinion in April to answer a request from State Representative Bela Kennedy of Bangor. Kennedy asked for the proper procedure to be followed when searching a school locker.

The Attorney General's opinion stated that students retain their constitutional rights under the fourth amendment against illegal search and seizure when they are in school. It stated further that school officials should have a warrant if they wish to use the evidence in criminal prosecutions.

Several districts, including Plymouth, then passed a policy which says that no school official could search a locker without a warrant if evidence will be used in court.

But legal firms representing state school districts (including Keller Thoma and Schwarze for Northville) quickly issued clarifying opinions which argued that school officials are empowered to search a student locker when 1) the official is acting to protect the health, safety and welfare of the school community and to enforce school rules; and 2) there is a reasonable suspicion that the search will produce evidence of a violation of school rules relating to health, safety or welfare of the student body or staff.

The Attorney General's office quickly replied that its opinion only concerned evidence confiscated for use in a

criminal trial. It agreed that school officials are empowered to search a school locker if "exigent" circumstances arise.

Livonia, Novi and now Northville have passed policies using that stand.

But Brighton Area Schools decided last summer that since it already had protection under the law it did not need a policy.

"If there is a bomb threat, you don't go look at a policy, you evacuate the school," said Brighton's Communication Director Arnie Rubin. "A policy will not absolve your legal obligations. Our principals operate the schools so that they have just cause when they open a locker ... It all boils down to what happens in court."

Northville is considering getting students and parents to sign waiver forms starting next fall in which students agree to a "contract" with the district to use school lockers provided school personnel can search lockers at any time. Students who do not sign waiver forms will not be assigned a locker, school board members said.

Assistant Attorney General Michael Hodge said this summer that a parent's signature alone on a waiver form may not hold up in court since there is a question whether a parent can sign away a child's protection under the fourth amendment.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) supports the position that students are protected under the fourth amendment.

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