

1,800 IN BIG ASYLUM IN PERIL FROM COLD

Essex County Hospital Heating Plant Breaks Down and Is Beyond Repair.

24 DEATHS WITHIN 20 DAYS

Relatives Are Practically Asked to Remove Patients from the Institution.

The 1,800 insane patients at the Essex County Hospital, at Cedar Grove, N. J., are suffering serious discomfort and in some cases incurring danger from the practically complete collapse of the heating and lighting plant of the institution. The sleeping quarters of the inmates are practically without heat, and have been so during the recent cold snap; the laundry is being operated by the power of the county steam roller, which has been backed up against the wall, and the management of the institution has even been trying to borrow a locomotive from one of the railroads to furnish steam for heating and power.

During the twenty days since the first of December there have been twenty-four deaths in the institution, as against eight for the entire month last year. There have also been thirty-two cases of frostbite in the last three weeks.

The seriousness of the situation received official recognition yesterday, when Dr. Guy Payne, the medical superintendent, sent the following letter to the nearest relative of each of the patients:

"...we feel it our duty to notify you that the wards of our institution are practically without heat and our patients are far from comfortable."

While it is not officially admitted, this letter has been widely construed as an invitation to the relatives at least of the patients whose condition is least serious to take them away until such time as the heating plant is again in running order. Dr. Payne would not admit that the increase in the death rate is due to the lack of heat, but no other reason has been ascribed.

The imminence of such a situation was realized last Winter, when it became apparent that the heating plant was wearing out. About a year ago the Board of Freeholders of Essex County ordered three new boilers, but for some reason not yet known to the public these were not delivered till the latter part of last month. Work was at once begun on the installation of one of them, but it will not be ready for use till the first of the year.

Meanwhile came the cold wave of last week. A determined attempt was made to do as much as possible with the old heating plant, but it was found that the deterioration had gone so far that practically nothing could be done. The old boilers leaked, the fire boxes were found to be full of holes, the steam pipes running to the various buildings were in bad condition, and the result was practically no heat.

There are twelve buildings used for living quarters of the patients, besides various structures used for administrative or supply purposes. When it became evident that the heating plant had gone to pieces the Board of Freeholders sent up 100 oil stoves, but these, distributed among the twelve buildings, have proved far from sufficient. In the assembly rooms where the patients congregate during the day there are open fireplaces, and by burning large quantities of wood in these the staff of the institution have managed to make these rooms fairly comfortable.

But the dormitories have no means of heating except the useless radiators and the insufficient oil stoves, and here conditions are said to be very bad. So far as can be learned, no additional supplies of bed clothing have been sent in, and there have been reports of much suffering in the dormitories.

The trouble has been most serious in the building where the 150 criminal insane have been housed. The most strenuous efforts have been made to heat this, but the presence of a large number of guards is necessary at all times to prevent the possibility of the inmates setting the building on fire by means of one of the oil stoves.

Negotiations have been going on for some time in the hope that the management could borrow a locomotive from one of the nearby railroads and run it up on a spur of track which reaches to the neighborhood of the institution. If this were done the boiler of the locomotive could be connected with the heating plant and some steam furnished, but all locomotives seem to be needed

at present by the demands of traffic, and so far no relief has come from this quarter.

The use of the boiler of the county steam roller to provide steam for the laundry is another emergency measure. The laundry cleans many thousands of pieces a week, and its operation has been seriously hampered, even with the supply of steam provided by the roller. It was impossible to learn yesterday what further measures of relief, if any, had been taken, with the exception of the letter notifying relatives of patients of the conditions.