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## **Psych center patient in court** *We want her in jail, security aides say*

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Middletown – Each time Sheila West turns up in court, chances are someone at a local mental health facility is suffering a fresh injury.

This time was no exception.

West was charged last week with second-degree assault, accused of using her cast-covered arm to hit a security aide at Mid-Hudson Forensic Psychiatric Center, a state facility in New Hampton.

The attendant suffered a concussion and pressed charges. Security union representatives say it was the second aide West attacked in a week. Mid-Hudson security staff members, who claim violence against them is chronic, are even more angered at the way West's arraignment was handled last week.

Town of Goshen Justice Thomas Cione initially ordered West sent to Orange County Jail to undergo an examination of her competency to stand trial. After discussing the case with acting Mid-Hudson Director Howard Holanchock, Cione decided to send West back to the psychiatric center instead. A court clerk said this was "because that is where the psychiatrists are" to conduct the competency exam.

Staff members say West belongs in jail. "Our concern is she was sent back to the facility," said union shop steward Jerry DeWitt. "Accountability (would be) her being remanded to Orange County Jail."

West is only 22, but she has been on the institution-to jail-to institution merry-go-round for years. She's a repeat offender who lashes out at hospital staff and is as well-known at the jail. Security Hospital Treatment Assistants, or SHTA's, say West is one of a dozen violent patients able to continue that behavior under what they claim are faulty guidelines for handling patients.

SHTA's say they are regularly punched, kicked, spat on and even bitten while their hands are tied by rules limiting the use of restraints and patient seclusion. Under the rules, a violent patient is put in a room with an open door without shackles while two SHTA's stand guard from a short distance.

"You have to stand there within six feet of the patient and wait for them to assault you," said Richard Harcrow, president of the New York State Correction Officers Benevolent Association union. "It's ludicrous. The (state) Office of Mental Health really needs to look at that policy."

These are not new complaints. Administrators are not allowed to talk with the press, but privately complain that the view presented by the union is not accurate. A spokesman for the state Office of Mental Health said Mid-Hudson is following "nationally recognized standards for treatment," to diffuse a situation, and the staff are well-trained in these matters.

Staff allege the administration is shirking its responsibilities to protect them: Security aide Joseph Padilla took off his sunglasses to show a bloodied eye and a jaw broken "here, here, here and here," he said. Another union shop steward, Sharon Grischenko, told of being knocked unconscious. Security aide Greg Kolvenbach filed charges after a patient gave him a concussion, but it was pleaded down to a misdemeanor.

"Every time a patient is taken to court on an assault case, they are plead down to harassment and brought back and not even put in restraints," he said.

In the meantime, security aide Taras Neznanyj was recently convicted by Justice Cione of assaulting a patient. It was the first such conviction at Mid-Hudson. Neznanyj is to be sentenced Feb. 16 – the same day West is scheduled to appear.