

Legislators pledge aid for mentally retarded

By JANE KURTIN
Advance Staff Writer

ALBANY — "If you give the Department of Mental Hygiene a lump budget of \$600,000,000," said Mrs. Julia Duffy, "it's like giving \$1 to a diabetic child standing in front of a candy store."

Mrs. Duffy, a head nurse at Pilgrim State Hospital on Long Island for 12 years, lashed out against the Department of Mental Hygiene and a system, she said, that takes money to use for people and then spends it on capital construction.

Although only a fraction of Wednesday's turnout showed up for the second hearing in Chancellor's Hall, what they lacked in numbers, they made up for in spirit.

Members of the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental and Physical Handicap, who sponsored the two days of hearings, listened to an irate group of witnesses who voiced their growing disenchantment with mental hygiene and, in fact, with the Legislature.

Two legislative experts pledged to correct the "intolerable" conditions at state mental facilities—hopefully to the point where there will be an attendant for every severely retarded patient.

Obviously moved by the testimony, the pledges came from Sen. Dalwin J. Niles, the presiding chairman, and his predecessor, Sen. William T. Conklin, following an impromptu news conference. They said they would work toward a situation

where severely retarded patients "are attended on a one to one basis around the clock."

Mrs. Duffy told the panel, "Before we had Miller (Dr. Alan D. Miller, commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene), we had one commissioner, one deputy commissioner and four or five assistant commissioners.

"Now, we have 30 deputy director administrators whose duties duplicate that of a director, with a yearly budget of \$1.5 million. There are 50 program analysts. We have no programs, but these errand boys have a yearly budget of \$1 million.

"There are 30 assistant commissioners. If Dr. Miller needs 30 assistants, something is very wrong with him and with them. Their total budget is \$1 million.

"There are 12 phantom hospitals — not yet approved by the Legislature — for \$9.5 million. Total 'fat,' \$13 million."

First to speak yesterday was Dr. William Bronston, a ward physician at Willowbrook State School. Bronston told the panel that "the Pandora's box of our state school system for the retarded has been opened."

Dr. Bronston strongly criticized the Department of Mental Hygiene for continuing, he said, to support a system of treating the retarded which removes them from the society and "has led to an ideology that retardation and developmental disabilities are fixed stigma, untreatable and worsening.

"Removing the children from society," Dr. Bronston said, "concentrating the handicapped, offering no hope of return to society, are the strategies of those who have no strategy. Willowbrook, Lechworth, Rockland represent the end points of ignorance and irresponsibility."

Dr. Bronston held the audience and the panel's attention with an account of the attitudes he claims are prevalent among administrative

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personnel, physicians and psychiatrists who are not trained to deal effectively with the mentally retarded.

"Most parents," he said, "have never been told that a

diagnosis such as grossly retarded, spastic or epileptic is not a sentence but signals the need for preventive and supportive services in the community.

"When the parent admits the child to a state school, the instructions are to allow the child to adjust and not to visit for up to three months, deterring the presence of parents' advocacy. The family is dealt with much in the way a funeral parlor contracts for the body of the deceased.

"From this point every inquiring phone call is met with the stock reply that the child

is doing fine and there is nothing to worry about . . . as

defined from the institution's perspective of what it expects from the child . . . From this point, doing well means becoming a member of a herd of compliant animals. No progress report to the family, with set goals, is required because under the institution's ideology, there can be no progress."

Mrs. Elizabeth Lee, a social worker fired Jan. 5 from her position at Willowbrook, explained that the institution is often mistakenly called a hospital.

"I guess," said Mrs. Lee, "that people make this mistake because they see doctors and nurses running the place instead of educating."

"Basically," Mrs. Lee continued, "the mentally retarded are not physically ill and do not need the care of doctors as much as the attention of teachers. They are for the most part not disturbed and psychiatrists are not what they need."

One father of a teen-age retarded girl described the

change that his daughter, classified as profoundly retarded, went through when she began to receive an education.

"When my daughter was 7 years old," the man said, "she was in diapers, couldn't talk and was considered hopeless.

We were advised to put her in a state institution.

"Several years ago, my daughter began learning within the community. She is now toilet trained, can read, write and will soon attend a normal class in a normal school."

Girl gets 1,033 to urge reform

A 14-year-old Westerleigh girl has collected 1,033 signatures on a petition deploring conditions at Willowbrook State School.

Margaret Longo of 822 Jewett Ave. collected the names from classmates, neighbors and friends, and is submitting the petition to Richard Dunham, director of the state budget.

She said she has already received a reply from Dunham to a previous letter in which the director said the state has had to cut back on normal services due to the lack of revenue in a period of national economic slowdown.

But one thing still puzzles the teen-ager, and that is where Gov. Rockefeller got \$5 million for use at Willowbrook "when he says the state is 'broke'."