

Asks shift of 1,500 from Willowbrook

Legislator admits cash is the key

Sen. Dalwin J. Niles, who heads a legislative committee which last week held hearings in Albany on conditions in Willowbrook State School, announced yesterday he would try to arrange a plan for the transfer of 1,500 patients out of the desperately overcrowded institution.

Niles — whose plan for the reduction in Willowbrook's 5,100-patient population depends entirely on the discovery of money the state claims not to have — said that he is not enthusiastic about a plan almost unanimously supported by parents that an independent Department of Mental Retardation be created.

Chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental and Physical Handicap, Niles has asked mental health officials to find about \$14 million to staff some 500 beds now ready, but unoccupied, in local city neighborhoods.

The shift of patients would take place gradually, Niles explained, with some going to the neighborhood centers and others to institutions for the mentally ill which do not normally take retarded persons. Space is available in these institutions, however.

Last month the state ordered a freeze in accepting new patients at Willowbrook.

In the past 12 months, however, five state institutions for the mentally and physically handicapped have been closed.

Other institutions, built for use by the Department of Mental Hygiene, stand empty — though every fixture right up to the light bulbs had been installed — for lack of funds to provide staffs.

Still Niles said that it was a "pitfall" for people to believe that the basic cause of problems within the Department of Mental Hygiene is lack of money.

Accordingly, Niles promised that if the \$14 million could not be found to make 500 beds operational, he would not recommend tax increases but would seek "alternate relief."

Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook, said Monday that no transfers of patients from Willowbrook were anticipated immediately and contrary to Niles' theory, said that it would take \$60 million to significantly reduce the population of Willowbrook alone over a three-year period.

Hammond said that any proposals to reduce the population at the institution would depend on the allocation of additional money to the State Department of Mental Hygiene.