

OK nursing home for retarded

By WILLIAM HUUS

A 240-bed facility adjacent to Doctors Hospital in Concord, originally built as a nursing home but never licensed for such use, has now been licensed by the state as a care center for mentally retarded adults in need of nursing care.

The Advance also learned that an agreement has been signed which paves the way for most, if not all, the beds to be occupied by patients who will be transferred from Willowbrook State School.

Israel Fogel, administrator of the facility on Targee St. which will now be called the Island View Care Center, said he intends to meet with city mental health officials this week to iron out final plans for the operation and expects to admit the first residents in two weeks.

News of the licensing and agreement with Willowbrook leaked following the unveiling of the agreement at a meeting Friday of the Staten Island Mental Retardation Regional Council.

The action ends speculation surrounding the building, on which construction was begun four years ago but which has never been used.

It was originally built as the Danube Nursing Home but was never certified for use as a nursing home under a state-imposed moratorium on the opening of such facilities in the city.

Last year it was proposed to use the facility as an "habilitation center" for mentally retarded youngsters, but approval for that proposal was not forthcoming either.

Subsequently, Fogel leased

the facility from the owners, listed under a corporate name and whose identities have not been made known, and began negotiating the current plan.

Reportedly, several members of the Island council objected to the proposal at Friday's meeting, hitting the plan on two counts.

They argued that the care center will not provide the type of community service which the council has advocated as the proper alternative to Willowbrook-type institutions, but will instead provide merely an admittedly better physical setting in which to place the retarded adults.

They also charged that "politics" must have been involved in the granting of the license since normal procedure was not followed and several city and state agencies which review such certification were circumvented in the process.

Dr. Miodrag Ristich, director at Willowbrook, and Fogel both claim, however, that the presence of nursing care is an important improvement for those patients that will be transferred and that they will be afforded an extensive program of personalized therapy and care.

Fogel also argued that the facility is a "pioneer" effort to provide medical and specialized care for retarded adults and, as such, was not subject to the heretofore "normal procedure" for review and licensing.

Before detailing the controversy surrounding the care issue, the complications of the establishment of the operation should be explained.

Applications for nursing home

approval are handled by the state Department of Health and, as noted, that agency has not been issuing such approvals in the city in recent years.

Applications for programs for the mentally retarded are normally reviewed by both the city Department of Mental Health and the state Department of Mental Hygiene. The Island regional council is an official planning unit for the city mental health agency and would be expected to provide the initial review for any Island proposal.

Despite the fact that the building at 1000 Targee St. was denied nursing home status and is now expected to serve the mentally retarded, its application was apparently placed in a new category of "care center" or "intermediate care facility."

The proposal was not presented to the Island mental retardation council for review, nor was it submitted to the city agency. Instead it was handled by the state Health Department, which issued the license "in conjunction with" the state mental hygiene agency, according to state officials.

The fact that the paperwork "went directly to Albany" was criticized by members of the Island council.

Further, if Willowbrook residents are transferred to the Island View center, the responsibility of funding their care will shift from the state (Department of Mental Hygiene) to the city (Department of Social Services).

Before any resident can be transferred, his personal case will be submitted to the Social

Services agency which can then approve the move and funding for the patient's bill at the care center.

Two members of the Island council, Rick Surpin, director of the Staten Island Community Corp., and Jerry Gavin, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society which represents parents of residents there, were displeased with the procedure used.

"Our council and the city mental health agency were bypassed, and instead the application for licensing went directly to the state agency which governs Willowbrook," Surpin contended in an effort to link the sudden approval with the transfer agreement.

Gavin added that the benevolent society was never informed of the proposal, despite the fact that the parents group has been successful in recent months in eliciting promises from the Willowbrook administration that it would be informed about programs that might affect their children.

"They (Willowbrook officials) were moving toward a commitment of not surprising us," he said, "and then suddenly they tell us about this."

Gavin argued strongly, from both the procedural and care providing standpoints, that the plan is nothing more than an "answer to the administrative problems" at Willowbrook.

He pointed out that the state has been under extreme pressure from the courts and community groups to correct the inhumane conditions at the facility since they were exposed during a campaign begun by the Advance more than two years ago.

Surpin pointed out that through a transfer of more than 200 residents to Island View, the state agency will be able to show statistically that it has reduced the resident population at Willowbrook and improved the resident-staff ratio while, at the same time, be financially responsible for fewer residents.

NOT INFORMED

Gavin added that the shift would merely allow the Willowbrook administration to carry out mandated changes more easily. He spoke specifically about renovation work proposed for certain buildings at Willowbrook.

"By transferring a group of patients to Island View, they won't have to worry about what to do with them while they renovate the building they were in — it will be empty," he argued.

He theorized other residents could then be shifted internally for further renovations.

"If they need a swing building, the state agency should have leased 1000 Targee St. on a short-term basis and delicately carried out temporary transfers," Gavin said, "instead of allowing a private interest to make a profit derived from tax dollars."

Fogel, however, was adamant that his negotiations with the state were properly carried out and carefully monitored by state and Willowbrook officials. Since the concept of providing nursing home care and special therapy for adult mentally retarded is new, he said, a new procedure was necessary.

Fogel and Dr. Ristich noted that a detailed "working agreement" has been signed which sets down guidelines for care programs at Island View, allows Willowbrook to provide

expertise in training programs and establishes that the state mental hygiene agency can monitor and inspect the facilities and programs once the operation is begun.

"We have 800 residents who need extended nursing care which we cannot presently provide," Dr. Ristich said. "This will give us the chance to allow some of them to receive it."

Fogel, who operates a 520-bed nursing home in Manhattan, said the center will have more than 200 doctors, nurses, social workers and specialized therapists — enough to provide a resident-staff ration of about 5 to 1 at any given time, much better than that afforded at Willowbrook.

Under the agreement, the staff will be given an orientation program by Willowbrook officials, and certain minimum care provision requirements have been set down.

In the case of a medical emergency, he said, Willowbrook has agreed to insure that a patient is admitted to a hospital (likely the U.S. Public Health Service facility in Clifton) if he is refused by an "accredited hospital of this area."

Fogel said the care provided will be personalized for each patient and will give those transferred a chance "to begin a new life."

Gavin disagreed, saying that while good medical care will undoubtedly be provided, residents placed in the care center will have "no hope of ever rising from the level Willowbrook has brought them to."

"They will be moved there by Willowbrook and forgotten — they'll be left to die," he charged.

He pointed out that one of the mandates faced by Willowbrook is a pledge to return discharged residents "to their home borough." He said that of the 800 residents in need of medical care, only 54 are Islanders. Thus, he said, most of those sent to Island View will not be being returned to their home boroughs as mandated.

Dr. Ristich agreed but argued that is insignificant since they will be receiving better care at the Concord facility.

Gavin also took issue with the "training program" to be provided for the Island View staff by Willowbrook, noting that the agreement specifies only one eight-hour session.

"All they'll do is tell the staff what to expect from the retarded people," he said. "They won't be able to learn anything meaningful. It's just an excuse to justify the move."

The extent of the care to be provided at Island View will likely be closely reviewed by the city when Fogel presents his proposal this week in an effort to arrange for the transfer of Willowbrook patients by insuring Social Services funding.