

State held ready to give license to

Concord home

By WILLIAM HUUS

Plans to open the Island View Care Center in Concord, for use as a nursing home to serve patients transferred from Willowbrook Developmental Center, the new name for Willowbrook State School, were dealt a glancing blow by the Staten Island Mental Retardation Regional Council yesterday.

But prospects appeared likely that the 240-bed facility will be licensed by the state and that the fight to prevent its proposed use has just begun.

The blow from the council came in a 15-1 vote to oppose the proposal for the still vacant care center at 1000 Targee St.

State mental health officials present at yesterday's council meeting indicated, however, that despite opposition from the local unit and the city, the state agency can be expected to issue an operating certificate — if it has not already secretly done so.

Where the fight is likely to occur, and become bitter, concerns the method of funding care costs for any mentally retarded residents from Willowbrook designated to be transferred to the private facility.

Since these residents would be eligible for federal funding through Medicare, a joint city-state panel of social service and mental health officials must approve each individual case before transfers can be enacted.

It became evident yesterday that city officials on that panel will vehemently object to each case and refuse to "sign off" such transfers.

This leaves the door open for a facility licensed specifically to serve Willowbrook that will be left without any patients. It also opens the door to a political tug of war which should equal, if not exceed, the concern for the welfare of the patients involved.

The care center has been a source of controversy for several months since the plan to transfer Willowbrook patients to it was revealed.

The revelation came when the Island council was told of a "working agreement" spelling

out the plan which was signed by Willowbrook and state mental hygiene officials and Israel Fogel, who is leasing the facility from owners whose names have been guarded by all involved.

The building took years to complete and, once completed, sat unused for more than a year. Intended to be a nursing home to serve the general public, the state Health Department refused to license it as such because of the proliferation of such homes on the Island.

Fogel and state Mental Hygiene Department officials apparently negotiated the "unique" use which was proposed late last year. They propose to serve adult mentally retarded patients from Willowbrook who are in need of constant nursing care.

Proponents have cited the uniqueness of the program in explaining the unorthodox licensing and planning procedures which have been questioned by the opposition. Community residents have already voiced their disapproval.

Yesterday the council voted to accept a committee report which criticized the Island View plan on three counts without getting into the merits or shortcoming of the services which would be afforded the patients there.

The report cited opposition because:

● "It is inappropriate because the size (240 beds) is totally contrary to the stated intent of state, city and local groups to create humane smaller living environments for the mentally retarded.

"The size makes normal interaction between the residents of the home and the community virtually impossible . . . and contradicts the Mental Hygiene Department's stated purpose of returning people from institutions to community living."

● "Of the Willowbrook residents eligible for transfer to the home, only 65 are from Staten Island. This would be

totally contrary to the department's stated intent to return Willowbrook residents to the borough of their origin."

● "The council has twice before objected to proposals for the use of this site. The department's recurrent espousal of the use of the building in contradiction to its stated aims can only be seen as another attempt to escape the embarrassment of Willowbrook, if not, as suggested in an editorial in the Advance, a politically motivated salvation of a miscalculated private investment."

The committee concluded that while the nursing home might provide care for its patients better than Willowbrook, that being "better than Willowbrook" is not sufficient criteria to endorse the proposal. A few members took exception to this viewpoint, saying that "half a loaf is better than one," but the majority thought otherwise.

Dr. Miodrag Ristich, director at Willowbrook, attacked the report at the meeting and argued that the home will provide specialized nursing care for those mentally retarded who need it.

Defending the question of size, Dr. Ristich said that a nursing home cannot be run as a "worthwhile" enterprise unless it has at least 200 beds, given current economic conditions.

Answering the charge that residents would not be returned to their home borough, he said that practice is meant to be a guideline and pointed out that the Willowbrook residents currently reside on Staten Island.

"Here we have something much, much better than Willowbrook and you say you want to wait for the ideal facility to be built," he lamented.

Dr. Ristich was, in turn criticized by Theodore Lucas, director of the city's Bureau of Mental Retardation Services, who said he will release an official "position paper" in the near future on the issue. He later toured the facility and met with Fogel.

Lucas commented, "I find it extremely difficult that Willow-

brook, with its budget, cannot do what any proprietary interim care facility can do." He pointed out that the cost per patient will be similar in either facility.

Lucas later admitted privately that he suspects the move is an effort on the part of state officials to save money and make their care of mentally retarded look better statistically.

At Willowbrook, the state funds patient care 100 per cent, at the care center, the cost would be split 50 per cent federal, 25 per cent state and 25 per cent city funds.

Lucas also challenged the proposal since "I have seen no evidence of a treatment plan being developed for the people who would move in."

As the political nature of the struggle began to show, Dr. Ira Gelber, deputy director of the state Mental Hygiene Depart-

ment's regional office, defended the plan saying: "The fact that the program isn't spelled out doesn't mean it's not intended."

She termed the plan a "chance to do something good for a segment of the Willowbrook population," in the face of the argument from others that it will "not be a one-shot deal but will become a trend of lateral movement" of the retarded.

No one could answer the crucial question of whether the facility has been "licensed" yet, but Lucas predicted privately that there is political pressure involved and that a license will be issued regardless of the council's vote and the apparent opposition of the city.

The question would still remain, however, of how the state can transfer Willowbrook residents without city approval.

The council will meet again July 19 at Willowbrook.