

State denies any deal with care center

By WILLIAM HUUS

State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Dr. Alan Miller said yesterday that Willowbrook Developmental Center residents will not be transferred to the Island View Care Center in Concord as long as there is community and governmental opposition to the plan.

Dr. Miller's disclosure came during a conversation with Assemblyman Lucio F. Russo and was later confirmed by the commissioner in Albany.

Such a decision apparently contradicts reports from state agency officials last week that the controversial private facility at 1000 Targee St. would be given an operating certificate despite local opposition to the agreement worked out for its use in conjunction with Willowbrook.

The care center is proposed to serve as a nursing home for 240 retarded adults in need of medical care. Funding for their care would shift from being solely state responsibility to a joint federal-state-city burden.

Controversy erupted over the plan when it was disclosed several months ago that an agreement to open the care center and transfer Willowbrook residents had been secretly

negotiated between state officials and Israel Fogel, who has leased the vacant facility.

It was built as a general proprietary nursing home but was never licensed as such. There has been speculation that the proposal represents an effort to "bail out" the owners of the center who have been linked privately to former Gov. Rockefeller.

Community opposition to the plan was instantaneous. Then last week, the Island's Mental Retardation Regional Council voted 15-1 against the proposal over the objections of Willowbrook and state mental hygiene officials, but apparently with the blessings of city mental health officials.

The state officials indicated, however, that the facility could still be licensed regardless of the vote. This would leave the review and approval of the individual transfer cases as the remaining step to carry out the plan, a step which a city official with input to the review said he would oppose.

Russo had met with Dr. Miller when the issue surfaced last spring and reported at that time that the commissioner would not act until hearings had been held and community

opinion had been assessed.

Russo said he telephoned Dr. Miller yesterday to discuss the outcome of last week's meeting of the regional council and to relay Advance editorial comment noting opposition to the plan, which appeared Sunday.

The Island legislator reported Dr. Miller "assured me there will not be any transfer as long as there is community and governmental opposition, that nothing will be done unless it is approved first."

Russo added that he was told the agency is "not interested in recouping personal losses" for the owners of the facility and that the proposed use of the care center is not a "fait accompli."

Dr. Miller's office was contacted later by the Advance, and the commissioner confirmed his pledge that "no residents will be transferred from Willowbrook to Island View if there is continued local community and governmental opposition."

Dr. Miller also indicated some measure of regret, saying that the agency still feels the 240 residents who would be transferred under the proposal would receive much better care than they now get at Willowbrook.

The Advance also learned, meanwhile, that the Concord care center has yet to receive approval from the city Health Department. Such approval is necessary at any facility for which Medicare funds are contemplated for future residents.

Reportedly, the city health agency inspected the plant and ordered some alterations be made before approval would be granted, although the improvements necessary were said to be minor in nature.