

Kolb wants fewer patients; hasn't visited nursing homes

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ALBANY — Dr. Lawrence C. Kolb, Gov. Carey's nominee to take over as state mental hygiene commissioner, said yesterday that most of the agency's institutions are understaffed and declared that more patients should be discharged into the community in order to solve the problem.

Kolb, testifying before the Senate Mental Hygiene and Addiction Control Committee, also said he was unaware that the death rate for persons in the custody of the department is about five times higher than that for the remainder of the state's population.

"I am shocked and amazed at the discrepancy between the two groups," Kolb said, after being informed of the figures by State Sen. James H. Donovan, R-Chadwicks, chairman of the committee.

The panel met for just over two hours yesterday to consider the nomination of Kolb and is expected to forward its recommendation to the Senate Finance Committee — chaired by State Sen. John J. Marchi of Staten Island — within a week. Kolb then must be confirmed by the full Senate.

Under questioning by committee members, Kolb said that although the staff-patient ratio at the state's mental institutions has improved over the years, it is still inadequate in terms of recent court decisions elsewhere in the country.

In terms of those decisions, he said, "We would find that our department has most of its institutions understaffed."

"We hope to reduce the population of the larger institutions to the point where the staff will be sufficient to care adequately for the residents," the commissioner stated, adding that the population will be lowered by transferring residents to smaller, community-oriented facilities.

"I think we should move toward greater placement in nursing homes and other community residences," he said.

Under questioning by State Sen. William T. Conklin, R-Brooklyn, Kolb said, however, that he was unaware of reports that conditions at some of the community facilities are worse than at the large institutions from which residents were transferred. He added that he has not yet visited any of the community residences.

Kolb also said he was unaware of statistics, which Donovan said he had obtained from the Department of Mental Hygiene, showing that the death rate in 1973 for persons in the custody of the agency was 46.3 per thousand, as opposed to 9.8 per thousand for the entire state population.

The commissioner said the higher death rate might be due to inadequate medical care, and added: "We have a high risk population, because so many of them had physical disabilities to start with."

In response to other questions, Kolb defended his remarks — made after he recently visited the Willowbrook Developmental Center — in which he indicated that constant criticism of the institution and its employees could have a negative effect on workers.

"Considering the general morale of those people," he said in reference to the Willowbrook employees, "it's tough for them to be the target of constant criticism."

"Continued criticism of employees at any institution would be destructive to morale and would make them less humane," he added.

Kolb stated that his department is "moving forward" with plans to open hostels or half-way houses on the Island to accept Willowbrook residents, despite the fact the proposal has drawn community opposition.

On other topics, Kolb said he would be opposed to efforts to split his agency into two separate departments, with one dealing solely with mental retardation, and expressed mixed feelings toward a proposal to establish a special review board to investigate all deaths at mental hygiene facilities.

Noting that patient deaths number about 4,000 annually, Kolb said such a board would be faced with a "big job" that

would probably require a large staff and an appropriation of funds. He criticized current expenditure levels for mental retardation research and said that some research funds are regularly used for day-to-day patient care.

Kolb also outlined what he said will be his top priorities as Mental Hygiene commissioner, including:

- A detailed study of the rehabilitation process for persons who have been discharged from institutions into the community.

- Establishment of new guidelines for the admission of persons to state institutions and for the readmission of former patients.

- An analysis of care offered to elderly residents of mental institutions, which he indicated will be carried out by a special task force to be appointed shortly.

- Establishment of a second task force to study violence at state-run mental facilities.

The commissioner has filed detailed financial disclosure and personal background statements with both the governor and the Finance Committee, although those files have not been made public.