

Buildup in care at state institution slowed by inflation, chief reports

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ALBANY — State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb yesterday repeated his contention that staffing at large, state-run mental institutions such as the Willowbrook Developmental Center "is below what would be considered acceptable levels."

"We do not believe the standard of care is what the department would like to see, but we are coming closer," Kolb said during a joint legislative hearing on Gov. Carey's proposed \$10.7-billion budget for the next fiscal year.

Kolb added that despite a substantial \$145-million increase in his agency's budget for the year beginning April 1, the effects of inflation and other economic factors will not allow improvements at mental institutions to be made as quickly as he and other officials would like.

He stated, however, that special efforts to improve the staff and reduce the patient population at Willowbrook will make the situation at the facility "superior to conditions at other institutions in the state."

The commissioner's remarks yesterday before the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means committees paralleled his testimony Tuesday during a routine Senate hearing on his appointment.

Kolb told the Senate Mental Hygiene and Addiction Control Committee that staffing levels at large institutions is inadequate, and he reaffirmed that point again yesterday.

"While attrition has allowed the staffing to improve, I want to point out that present staffing is below what would be considered acceptable levels," he told State Sen. John J. Marchi and other members of the Legislature's fiscal committees.

The commissioner, however, did not make a pitch for any additional funds, and said after the two-hour session that he believes the \$989.1 million Mental Hygiene Department appropriation recommended by Carey will be adequate.

"We believe that this expresses the humanitarian efforts of Gov. Carey and his colleagues," Kolb said of the increase for his department, one of the few spending hikes proposed by the governor.

"But through the fiscal condition of the state and inflation, we will not be able to move forward as quickly this year as we would have liked to," he added.

As he did Tuesday, Kolb said again yesterday that the department hopes to be able to reduce the patient population at mental institutions by moving residents into smaller, community-oriented facilities.

In terms of Willowbrook, the commissioner said current plans are to reduce the population there from the present level of about 2,800 patients to 2,000, a process he estimated could take as long as 18 months to complete.

While the patient load at Willowbrook has declined over the last few years, Kolb indicated the 800 patient reduction will probably await the outcome of a lawsuit in which parents of residents at the institution are suing the state over conditions at the facility.

"The hope would be not only to improve service, but to reduce the population to a manageable level by transfers and repatriation to other facilities," he said.

Kolb explained that one aspect of the population-reduction program will involve sending non-Staten Island residents of the institution to other facilities closer to their families.

Referring to attempts to reach an out-of-court settlement of the lawsuit, Kolb said that a meeting between state officials and attorneys representing the parents will be held "shortly," although the parents' groups said on Wednesday that no negotiations will be held until September.

On another topic, Kolb yesterday renewed his opposition to a plan to split his agency into two separate offices — one of which would deal solely with mental retardation — and charged that the breakup would cost taxpayers an additional \$7 million annually.

While Kolb was speaking, the Senate approved by a margin of 45-6 a bill authorizing creation of an Office of Mental Retardation in the executive branch of the state's government.

The proposal, if approved by the Assembly and signed into law by the governor, would leave the Department of Mental Hygiene with responsibility for the mentally ill, drug abusers and alcoholics.

"We have serious doubts that the establishment of this office would improve the care for the severely retarded," Kolb said at the budget hearing. "By separating out mental retardation, it would seem to make the governor and the Legislature receptive to other requests to separate other departments," he added.