

State rescues school job aid setup at Willowbrook, South Beach

By REGINALD PATRICK

The state Department of Mental Hygiene will use "in house" funds to finance the Youth Opportunity Program (YOP) through June, it was reported yesterday.

The statewide, \$2.1-million program, which employs about 50 Staten Island high school and college age youths in various capacities at both the South Beach Psychiatric and Willowbrook Developmental Centers, appeared doomed to end March 31 for lack of direct funding in Gov. Carey's budget for fiscal year 1975-76.

In a partial turnabout, Carey's office yesterday indicated the governor would allow the seven-year-old program to continue if the mental hygiene budget could be juggled to include it.

Lawrence McArthur, associate commissioner of mental hygiene, said Dr. Lawrence C. Kolb, commissioner, in turn told YOP officials that he believes funding for a three-month period can be found.

While McArthur was not sure just how much cash will be needed, YOP downstate coordinator Robert Lewis claimed it would take at least \$480,000 to pay staff and supervisors during the period. He calculated this figure on the basis of six pay periods of \$80,000 each.

"Actually," said McArthur, "Mr. Lewis' figure may be a little low."

The interim financing of the program, McArthur said, will preface a formal request (contained in the department's supplemental budget request) for \$2.1 million to see the program through the end of the fiscal year. This request, which is now being prepared, should be acted on by the Legislature before the end of June, McArthur said.

"Neither I nor Dr. Kolb has any information of what the

state's action in this matter will be," he said. "This administration has, as you know, many needs for the dollars that are available. However, this department thinks the Youth Opportunity Program is of great value."

Exuding confidence, Lewis predicted that YOP will be re-funded "because it is a preventive mental hygiene program that is an integral part of what the Department of Mental Hygiene is all about."

"In his message to the Legislature," Lewis said "Carey said some of the causes of mental illness are inadequate housing, poor education and lack of jobs. He said these things cause neurosis and psychosis. Our program has proved without a shadow of a doubt that we can correct some of these situations, that we can break the welfare chain."

Lewis said Carey originally cut funding for YOP because of "bad advice and the fact that he really did not understand what we are doing."

At Willowbrook Developmental Center, the project is supervised by Mrs. Thelma E. Davis, who commented: "I basically have faith in the state legislators. When I was in Albany many of them told me they feel that YOP is a necessary program and should be continued in a supplemental budget."

"I'm very happy mental hygiene is extending it," she said, "but I sort of wish this was a permanent thing, not something that has to be continually placed in the budget each year. It's frustrating to the students and everybody concerned."

She said the program's main value resides in the fact that "it keeps young people off the streets and provides them with spending money and training." Enrollees also re-

ceive counseling for personal and home problems, she said.

The 20 youngsters in her charge work in various departments at the Willowbrook complex, including the public relations office, the food service department, the recreation division, the maintenance department and the wards.

"Because of the vast number of areas in which they work," she said, "they can better decide what they want to be in the future, whether they choose jobs in the health field or business."

Butch Mangin, YOP supervisor at the South Beach Psychiatric Center, where students work at everything from junior therapy aides to volunteer recruiters, said he is "overjoyed at the extension," adding that "if the supplemental budget request goes through it will rekindle some of the students' faith in government."

Mangin said he "agrees wholeheartedly with Mrs. Davis that YOP should be made a permanent thing."

"If this were a permanent program," he said, "we could really develop the potential of this thing. These year-to-year battles in the Legislature sacrifice time that could be used working with students."

Statewide there are 850 students and 36 supervisors in YOP. Since its inception in 1967, 6,000 students have taken part. The program's main aim and, according to its sponsors, its main success, has been to prevent high school youths from dropping out of school and society.

A YOP official has estimated that more than 1,000 program graduates have successfully gone on to other employment. In fact, the Department of Mental Hygiene is currently employing over 200

graduates of the program.

The program reportedly grew out of the racial riots and chaos of the mid-1960s.

In the words of Carey's press secretary, the program was cut because "in an austerity budget, it was a low priority item."