

Willowbrook Hope

The signing by Governor Carey of an agreement to settle the three-year court fight over Willowbrook represents only the beginning of hope for the patients consigned to that dismal institution for the mentally retarded.

It is clear that not even the rudiments of a plan now exist for the hostels, halfway houses and day-care training centers through which retardates are to be moved out of Willowbrook into smaller units where more individualized attention can be given to developing their capacities.

To guard against yet another in the endless list of disappointments that have attended past efforts to rescue Willowbrook patients from brutality and neglect, the agreement does provide for a seven-member review panel—jointly chosen by the state and the plaintiffs in the original court action—to oversee progress.

There is good reason, however, to doubt that even the most diligent monitoring by this group can achieve the desired results without a thoroughgoing reorganization in the bureaucracy that administers the state's gigantic mental hygiene program.

That bureaucracy has been put under excellent top-level direction with the Governor's appointment of Dr. Lawrence C. Kolb as Mental Hygiene Commissioner. But no one official can be expected to transform single-handedly a structure that over the years has put much more stress on the institutional treatment of mental illness than it has on the quite different mission of developmental therapy for the mentally retarded.

Both houses of the Legislature have now passed and sent to the Governor bills that would create a special Office for Mental Retardation in the executive branch. About one-third of the budget and personnel of the existing Mental Hygiene Department would be transferred to the new office, with a mandate to end the disgraceful conditions not only at Willowbrook but in other less publicized warehouses for the mentally retarded.

Fragmenting the existing department undoubtedly will produce many problems in its own right, but the record of human degradation in existing institutions is an indictment the state cannot ignore. Specialized attention to the needs of the mentally retarded offers increased promise of successful fulfillment of the Carey commitment at Willowbrook, as well as more enlightened care for all retardates in the state.