

# Budget nip may halt Willowbrook cutback

By JOHN T. CRUDELE

The city's commissioner of mental health said yesterday that state cuts in mental health funds to the city may "dash" the planned population reductions of the Willowbrook Developmental Center which were decreed by a Brooklyn federal court consent order last month.

The decree, which ended a three-year legal battle to improve conditions at the center, put the state under order to reduce Willowbrook to a 250-bed facility. The current population of the center is about 2,900.

According to Dr. June J. Christmas, commissioner of the city's Department of Mental Health and Retardation Services, the budget cutbacks by the state would imperil the court order because community services provided by the city would not be available for the patients released from the institution under the trimmed budget.

"Those agencies which can participate (in the decree) may now be limited," Dr. Christmas explained at a meeting in Richmond College held in an effort to receive more community input in the city's mental health programs.

The meeting was billed as a forum for exchanging ideas concerning improved mental health facilities throughout the city and was one of a series of such meetings held by the commissioner on Staten Island. But it was obvious from the start that the major concern of all those in any way related to providing mental health care was proposed budget cuts and the effect the cuts will have on services.

"This is not a budget hearing," said Paul Cooper, regional director of the group for Staten Island, at the outset of the meeting.

But whether or not it was a budget hearing, money problems were the major concern

of those present.

In her opening remarks, Dr. Christmas admitted the obvious—that it was difficult to discuss the area of mental health without getting in a conversation on budget cuts.

Dr. Christmas, who along with Dr. Lawrence Kolb, commissioner of the state Mental Hygiene Department, will meet with Gov. Carey today in Albany in an attempt to have \$10 million in state funds reallocated to the city, admitted that the present budget would mean a cutback of 35 per cent in the city's mental health service.

"It's true that this isn't a budget hearing, but I know we will be exchanging our views on where we are going," she said, beginning the major theme of the meeting.

Then Dr. Christmas got into the Willowbrook situation, implicitly charging that the state is going back on the promise made in the court settlement of the case against the institution.

Gov. Carey, in one of his first official acts as governor, signed the consent decree which said the state would provide the funds necessary for the transfer and care of the patients dismissed from Willowbrook.

"I'm saying I don't care how they (the state) do it, as long as we're not in a bind," Dr. Christmas, added, referring to the 11th hour attempt to get another \$10 million added to the current \$50 million state budget for mental health.

Dr. Christmas also noted that a current inequity in the allocation of mental health funds for the different boroughs has been slowly remedied over the last four years.

"We are moving toward a more equitable distribution of funds now that doesn't mean equal—we're nowhere near that yet," said Dr. Christmas, who explained that a lump

sum allocation for each borough was considered until the current money problems caused that solution to be "tossed to the wind."

Murray Hecht, director of the alcoholism program at the St. Vincent's Medical Center, told the commissioner that alcoholism programs on Staten Island were being "short-changed" because state funding had been cut back in anticipation of federal appropriations which were never forthcoming.

"The city and state took the \$200,000 and divided it among other problems in the city," Hecht said of the money cut from the Staten Island appropriation.

"When the city ran out of money, we had to make the choice to divide the money with programs that already existed or fund this new program," Dr. Christmas explained, adding that the money cut from the Island program went to fund already existing programs throughout the city.

Several of the professionals dealing with mental health care on Staten Island as well as Dr. Christmas expressed an interest in the outcome of today's meeting in Albany with the governor and asked concerned residents to contact local elected officials to express concern over the proposed cutback in state funds.

John R. Walsh, executive vice president of St. Vincent's Medical Center, told the commissioner of the uncertainty among patients as well as employes of the hospital because of mental health cuts which bring about the need for more definite plans by the city's Department of Mental Health in regard to the necessary cuts.