

Complaints corner Willowbrook Review Panel

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The complex interwoven problems of Willowbrook Developmental Center—what to do today and what to do tomorrow—were aired in dramatic and sometimes hostile fashion yesterday at the first public hearing of the court-mandated Willowbrook Review Panel.

Pleading parents, advice-giving mental retardation officials and job-seeking consumers combined for two and one-half hours at Willowbrook to pose the pertinent and fateful questions about the future of the 2,800-bed state institution for the retarded.

Despite a short circuited, barely audible microphone system, the three-month-old Review Panel heard these problems reverberate through a campus auditorium:

❑ Will the residents of Willowbrook be "dumped" into other state facilities merely to meet the court-ordered resident population reduction?

❑ Can the state work, on one hand, to reduce and dismantle Willowbrook to 250 beds in six years and on the other hand humanize the existing facilities while that is being done?

❑ Will the state make available to voluntary community mental retardation agencies the money needed to serve the needs of Willowbrook residents as they exit from the troubled state school?

❑ Can the Review Panel, mandated to oversee the concurrent humanization and dismantling of Willowbrook, force the state Department of Mental Hygiene to act with compassion and responsibility in meeting the daily, simple living needs of the retarded?

There were no answers posed yesterday.

The forum was to elicit the "recommendations, comments or suggestions" of the public as set forth by a precedent-setting federal court consent decree, agreed to by the state April 25.

The Review Panel is composed of seven veteran officials in mental retardation, ranging from Dr. James Clements, a facility director in Atlanta, Ga., to David Rosen, a facility director in Detroit, to James A. Forde, the former acting director of Willowbrook who is now Mid-Hudson regional director.

"We have no problem in assembling experts," Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents group, told the panel. "We have no problem getting money and there is plenty of literature available on retardation. But the problem here is still the same.

"We can set new guidelines, new goals, but we still have the same problems. I come with a troubled mind," Pinto said moments before leaving the auditorium to inspect a group of buildings on the 384-acre campus.

"Can't we improve Willowbrook today, even if we won't be here tomorrow?" he asked about the proposed six-year reduction plan.

After hearing more than 20 speakers have their say, Forde answered Pinto's pointed question, responding to an inquiry, he said: "It can be done. But it's going to be costly and it's going to be tough."

And who's going to see that the 29-page court-ordered consent decree, vague on some points and specific on others, is followed to provide humane living conditions, maximum

programmatic living skills development and eventual lodging in community residences?

That, according to Review Panel chairman Clements, is the task that faces the panel, which has met twice.

"It is our role," he said, after the hearing had concluded, "to monitor standards. If there is a need for changes or additions, we will inform the court.

"Our backup," he said, about possible resistance from the state Department of Mental Hygiene in implementing the court-imposed conditions, "is to go back to the court."

The consent decree states: "Any interference...with the Review Panel...may be punishable as contempt of court and subject to other sanctions by law."

Clements said that it would be "unfair to assume that the Department of Mental Hygiene would not cooperate." He conceded that there is a "danger of conflict" in attempting to humanize and dismantle at the same time.

But, he said, that can be overcome if the department has "a clear plan." It would be "unconscionable," he said to dismantle Willowbrook and "forget about the Willowbrook people for six years."

As for yesterday's public hearing, which was ostensibly to get recommendations for a consumer review panel to aid the overall Review Panel, Clements said it went "very well."

Forde said he was "disappointed more parents and consumers" had not shown up.

Mickey Marlib, a director with the Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development, said the reason for poor attendance was obvious. "I question how they can bring people from all over the country and expect a ballroom full of people," he told the

panel.

"This room should be standing room only," he said about the auditorium, which has a seating capacity of 500 but which had about 100 persons in it yesterday.

Those that were on hand harped on the "dumping" of residents from Willowbrook to other ill-prepared dehumanizing state facilities. A parent, Mrs. Rose Silverman, said: "They're moving people all over, no one knows where and no one knows how.

"I don't know what you're developing here but mass murder," she said. "The department of Mental Hygiene is holding our children hostage."

Thomas Prisco, a member of a state-level mental retardation advisory committee, said that the state is trying to "make Willowbrook look good with a numbers game."

"They're dumping residents all over the place. Don't dump them," he said. "If we're not sending them to a better place, keep them here," he urged, adding that although group homes are meeting community resistance, they must be the wave of the future for care of the retarded.

About community facilities, Clements said: "Seeing is believing. All the talking in the world won't help. Obviously there will be problems, but those community facilities must be developed."