

## Editorial page

### Our opinion

# But how about some input?

The "track record" at the Willowbrook Developmental Center hasn't been improved by the internal memorandum discussing possible courses of action at the huge institution.

Even though a spokesman tried to play down the importance of the memo by contending that everything is just in the "talking stage," the regional director was asked for a decision by mid-September.

The people who run Willowbrook, both at the state and higher levels, don't yet seem to have learned that they're no longer running their own tight shop without outside interference.

Although its population is down to 2,800 from a peak of perhaps 6,000, the institution is still a huge operation — and it continues to bear deep scars over the quality and methods of its care.

And lest the officials of the institution forget, there is a review panel mandated by a federal court to oversee the institution's development, which also must be taken to mean any changes in policy or method of operation.

Moreover, after all the revelations and hubbub, it would seem that any changes should be made only after consultation with parent and consumer groups. But none of this has taken place. The department continues to go on its not-so-merry way unilaterally.

Technically, it does not seem to be a breach of the consent decree which set up the review panel, but it seems to violate the spirit of what the court attempted to achieve.

Besides, we don't see how the fate of the buildings and grounds can be changed or disposed of without total community consideration.

There are 44 buildings on the 384 acres at Willowbrook.

Sure, certainly radical changes are in the making. Eventually the institution is to serve only cases from Staten Island. Even if the Island's population should grow sharply, it would be dealing with hundreds, not thousands, of cases.

But why decide to tear down buildings and shift the functions of others? Why play a game of musical chairs?

Perhaps it might be best if the institution were to be moved to another site, one specifically constructed according to the latest methodology.

Perhaps those buildings and that extensive acreage might well be used for some other community institution or project. It is certainly not a decision to be made lightly and without full consideration of all the possibilities.

Of course there is an emotional pull involving decisions at the moment. Regarding big Building 2, the memo said bluntly, "Board up and request demolition of this monstrosity." Parents groups would applaud that idea. But does the building have no value at all in this era of fantastic building costs.

Before anyone plunges ahead with radical solutions for the buildings and grounds, let us not forget that the institution once served well as a hospital for wounded servicemen during World War II. Because it is no longer viable as a proper institution for the retarded does not mean that the wrecker's ball should roll across the grounds without inhibition.