

Role of unit up in air

Panel to develop goals at Willowbrook

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Amid a confusion over what role it will play, a consumer review panel has been chosen to aid in the development of the "philosophy and long-range goals" of Willowbrook Developmental Center, the commissioner of the state Department of Mental Hygiene has announced.

Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb revealed yesterday the names of the seven-member consumer panel which will aid the already existing Willowbrook Review Panel in helping the institution for the retarded phase down from 2,200 residents today to 250 in six years.

The panel will "expand the number of eyes and ears" watching the controversial state facility, according to Chris Hanson, one of the attorneys who drew up the federal court consent decree which has mandated radical change at Willowbrook and set up the review and consumer panels.

What was not clear yesterday, however, was what role and how much authority the panel will have. Even the seven panel members were not sure what role they will play in attempts at improving the quality of life for the 3,000 retarded persons who were residents at Willowbrook in

1972 when court action forced the consent decree.

The seven members are Elliot Aronin, former president of the State Association for Retarded Children; Bernard Carabello, a former Willowbrook resident; Jerome Isaacs of 224 Martin Ave., Willowbrook, who is hostel chairman for the Willowbrook Benevolent Society; Diana McCourt, a Manhattan resident who was a plaintiff in the court case; Anthony Pinto, longtime president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society; Ida Rios, a member of the Willowbrook board of visitors, and Ronnie Smith, regional president of the Civil Service Employees Association.

"Our role has not been clearly defined," Pinto said, but, he added, "we have to be able to go to other receiving institutions" to monitor the quality of care offered.

When parent and consumer groups petitioned in federal court for changes at Willowbrook, there were approximately 5,000 residents. An "operation exodus" reduced the population to about 2,200 today.

However, the consent decree signed by Gov. Carey April 21 set down standards that apply to all 5,000 former

and present Willowbrook residents.

The panel members, in interviews yesterday, expressed strong views that an important part of the job will be to see that as Willowbrook's population is continually reduced, the residents are not dumped in poor treatment facilities.

"We're talking about the 3,000 in and the 3,000 out of Willowbrook," said Isaacs.

"We will have to be concerned that transfers have been to satisfactory institutions," Aronin said, adding that the panel's goal will be to improve conditions at Willowbrook along with facilities in the community.

"We don't want residents being moved around just to reduce population. Reduction is only a part of the problem," said Aronin, an activist in mental retardation care for 23 years. "We must be concerned with each resident."

The panel, according to Hanson, is technically responsible to the court, but in practice will report to the review

panel which, in about a week, will be issuing its first report on its activities.

One major action taken by the panel has been the halting of placement of Willowbrook residents in a state developmental facility in Spring Valley, N.Y., a facility it felt was not appropriate.

The review panel submitted 18 names to Commissioner Kolb who then made the final seven selections. Smith, Aronin and Mrs. McCourt were appointed for one-year terms; the others for two years.

According to Hanson, the panel members will receive reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses and can receive daily salaries if the commissioner wishes.

The panel members will have access to all documents and officials at Willowbrook and receiving institutions and will work closely with a professional advisory board which has not yet been established.

Hanson says that another major part of the consumer

panel's job will be a surrogate parent role for the approximate 4,000 members of the class who either have been abandoned by their parents or have no living relatives. The consent decree states that parents can intercede on their child's behalf to have treatment care plan modified or improved. Where there is no parent, Hanson says, the consumer panel will step in.