

# Willowbrook panel confers on placement

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Officials of the state Department of Mental Hygiene are huddling this weekend with members of the Willowbrook Review Panel, comparing notes and analyzing the first draft of the final community placement plan that will map the future of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

The draft, which must be submitted to Federal Court Judge Orrin G. Judd by Feb. 28, will set timetables and, more importantly, will detail where and how the 2,690 retarded residents of Willowbrook will be dispersed.

The dispersal of residents into group homes with 15 or less residents is the backbone of the Willowbrook consent decree, and the bane of mental hygiene planners.

It is a woe because observers feel there is residual opposition by some Department of Mental Hygiene staffers to community placement of the retarded and, secondly, because finding appropriate community settings for the retarded is a complex, problem-filled task.

"We all agree there are too many people at Willowbrook," says Thomas Coughlin, a deputy commissioner for the Department of Mental Hygiene whose job is to implement the consent decree.

"And we all agree that residents should be placed in the community," says Coughlin.

What else the department and the independent, court-appointed review panel will agree upon remains to be seen. This weekend's huddle will mark the first time department officials will see the placement plan drawn up by the panel.

An initial community placement plan was first drawn up in October by Joseph Harris, deputy commissioner for retardation with the city Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services and Sylvan Furman, a Department of Mental Hygiene regional office official.

"It was a 'good effort,' a blueprint," according to Dr. Jennifer Howse, executive director of the Willowbrook Review Panel. But it was a plan that needed more detail, so the panel began requesting more detailed information from the state about the characteristics and needs of the 6,000 former residents of Willowbrook who are the objects of the placement plan.

Based on discussions this weekend, Dr. Howse says there will be "an attempt to put together one document" which will be distributed city-wide to a wide range of affected groups who will gather on Feb. 5-6 "to share points of view."

"The idea," says Dr. Howse, a retardation specialist from Florida, "will be that each group goes into a corner, comes up with ideas and recommendations and brings them back to the panel which will have the responsibility, with the state, to develop the final plan."

The Review Panel is slated to meet the weekend of Feb. 14-15 and the details of the placement plan will be hammered out by the seven-member panel.

It will take a lot of hammering.

There are no easy answers to the toughest task faced by the state and the Review Panel: the lack of community-based day-care rehabilitation programs.

Observers feel that community group living arrangements can be made in hostels, halfway houses, foster homes, and by returning some residents back to their natural parents, thanks to a \$273 monthly stipend now available to the parents.

What is missing are "certain service networks," says Dr. Howse. Without those

"The defendants (the state Department of Mental Hygiene) shall develop a full program of normalization and community placement with a full complement of community services... (including) work placement, legal services, health services, recreational services, citizen advocacy and... education."

To a limited degree those services are available, but not on the scale needed to accommodate Willowbrook's residents. Those who need to be placed now are severely retarded, many multiply handicapped.

They have special rehabilitation needs which, on Staten Island, can be met by the non-profit Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children Inc. "We could expand," says program director Mrs. Joan Hodum. "We could get more staff and more space."

"But we would have to know that the money is forthcoming to fund us," she says about the program which now serves 140 Staten Islanders in eight programs. "Right now we're very strapped."

"The Staten Island Aid will need money," says Linda Carelli, a community service director for Islanders at Willowbrook.

"Without the needed community-based services the child will go home and just vegetate," says Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents group. "We need a complete package... the move plus the services."

"Anything else," says Pinto, "will be dumping."

"If I had nothing to do with the situation I might think that dumping was a distinct possibility," said Coughlin from his Albany office. "But I can assure that no one will be put in the community unless a full day-time program is available."

Coughlin also assures that money is available to follow the ex-Willowbrook resident into the community, money

from Chapter 62 of 1974 mental hygiene legislation.

"The problem we get into, and it's a real problem, is how about the kid in the community? We have 10 per cent funding for the Willowbrook resident, but the voluntary agency (like Staten Island Aid) has to pay 50 per cent for the community child."

A change in funding is necessary, Coughlin says, so that agencies can be funded to pay for every retarded person, regardless of where he comes from. "It's being worked on, but it's a tough fiscal year," Coughlin says.

The goal of 250 residents at Willowbrook by 1981 will begin to unfold this weekend. Already happening, however, is the consent-decree-ordered 200 community placements by April 30.

Is there any reason why that goal can't be met? "Nope. Nope," says Coughlin. "The only roadblock is the lack of total day care facilities."

"We have no indications that the April 30 goal cannot be met," says Dr. Howse.

April 30 is a first stop on the road to dismantling the dehumanization that has been Willowbrook Developmental Center.