

Kolb: 200 Willowbrook residents to be transferred soon

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ALBANY—The population of the Willowbrook Developmental Center will be reduced to at least 2,500 this year despite recent delays in transferring residents from the sprawling institution, Department of Mental Hygiene officials said yesterday.

Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb, testifying before the Legislature's fiscal committees, indicated that more than 200 Willowbrook residents may soon be moved to other developmental centers elsewhere in the state under the terms of a recent court ruling.

Brooklyn Federal Court Judge Orrin Judd ruled Feb. 10 that the decree, approved last April, gives the state the right to shift Willowbrook residents to other institutions where conditions are better. The Willowbrook Review Panel, a group set up to oversee implementation of the decree, had claimed that such transfers were not permitted.

"We have been delayed by the position of the Review Panel that transfers, even to a better institution, would not be acceptable," Kolb said. "Our goal this year is still to reduce Willowbrook's population to 2,500."

Kolb told Senate Finance Committee Chairman John J. Marchi of Ward Hill and other legislators that Willowbrook's population now stands at 2,723 as opposed to 3,051 before the

consent decree was signed by Gov. Carey. Under that agreement, the institution's residents may number no more than 250 by 1981.

Questioned by reporters later yesterday, Kolb indicated that the Department of Mental Hygiene may use Judd's ruling to transfer several hundred Willowbrook residents to other developmental centers closer to their homes.

Still more residents of the Staten Island institution may be shifted to smaller, community-based residential facilities, he added.

Kolb, in a prepared statement submitted to the fiscal committees, also disclosed that his department will ask the Legislature for an additional \$2 million to expand the range of services offered by the South Beach Psychiatric Center and three other similar facilities.

While the exact nature of those expanded services could not immediately be learned, Kolb said there are no plans to house former Willowbrook residents at the Ocean Breeze psychiatric center.

The South Beach Psychiatric Center, under the proposed 1976-77 state budget unveiled by Carey last month, would have its operating funds cut by about \$150,000 to just over \$12 million. Willowbrook is in line for a \$3.2-million increase in its budget, to about \$53 million, but mental health officials warned yesterday that its appropriation is likely to decrease in future years.

Thomas Coughlin, deputy commissioner for mental retardation, explained that Willowbrook's budget has been increased in the last two fiscal years to hire additional staff members as required under the Consent Decree.

"The consent decree standards have now largely been met, so you will start to see in the next few years a decrease in Willowbrook's budget," Coughlin said.

Although Willowbrook's population is to be cut to 250 within five years, Kolb said his department currently has no plans for the ultimate disposition of the sprawling mid-Island institution. An act of the Legislature would be required to close the facility outright, he said, since the Department has no authority to open or shutter such institutions on its own.

"In a case where Willowbrook just wasn't being used, the department would go to the Office of General Services to see whether any other state agencies could use the buildings," Kolb said. "If not, then the buildings would probably be torn down with the land offered first for public pur-

poses."

The commissioner indicated that it would be too expensive to keep Willowbrook open for several hundred residents, since on the average a third of a developmental center's budget is spent on fixed operating costs. In Willowbrook's case, that would amount to about \$17 million.

In other testimony yesterday, meanwhile, Kolb said the department will shortly make public a draft, five-year master plan which is to serve as the blueprint for the gradual elimination of large state-run institutions and a shift in emphasis to small community-based facilities.

State and local officials, voluntary agencies and citizens groups will be given an opportunity to comment on the draft plan, the commissioner said.

As part of the master plan's development, Kolb said his agency will be forming a special task force to examine methods of channeling money appropriated for the department to local governments, which are to assume greater responsibility for the care of the mentally ill and the mentally retarded.