

Willowbrook panel proposes 5 borough placement offices

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The Willowbrook Review Panel has proposed the establishment of five borough offices to direct, coordinate and monitor the placement of Willowbrook Developmental Center residents into the neighborhoods of the city.

In a 348-page document, "Community Placement Plan," the panel has recommended that the state Department of Mental Hygiene establish independent Borough Mental Retardation Service Offices which would radically alter the focus of care for the retarded.

The borough office would shift responsibility away from the 384-acre Willowbrook campus where 2,650 retarded residents presently reside. A U.S. District Court supervised consent decree has ordered the dismantling of the 36-year-old Willowbrook to 250 residents by 1981.

The Review Panel plan would fix responsibility for developing backup medical-rehabilitative services and for placement with the borough office. Furthermore, it would reduce the developmental center to just one of the community placement options open to the borough office.

"The role of institutions" like Willowbrook, the report says, "must be recognized for their critical importance and made use of, but (they will) not be the focal point of services."

Observers expect that the Review Panel plan for five borough offices, each costing

millions of taxpayer dollars, will meet firm opposition from the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Noting the department's opposition, the Review Panel says the state's "plans indicate that the establishment of a complete placement unit in each borough would be both 'awkward' and an unnecessary duplication of services."

The report gives no figures as to the cost of the five borough offices. A panel spokesman said, however, that the development of the offices would "not come overnight" and would coincide with a scaling down, physically and financially, of developmental centers.

A fight over the borough office would not be the first encounter between the court-appointed panel and the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Since the consent decree was reached April 25, 1975, the panel and the state have twice gone to court and an ideological dispute over the role the panel should play at Willowbrook is still evolving.

U.S. District Court Judge Orrin G. Judd has set the May 7 as the next day in court for the two parties and it is expected that the community placement plan will be on the agenda.

The basis of the decree is that each of the 5,431 1972 retarded Willowbrook residents is capable of development which can best be achieved in "the least restrictive and most normal living conditions possible."

The panel's job, as defined

by the decree, is to set up the structures which will oversee the development of "normal living conditions."

The available community options, the report says, are placement with natural or foster parents, in group homes, in apartment complexes, in psychiatric centers, in nursing homes or in developmental centers.

The most desirable option, the report emphasizes, is with the natural parent. "One of the most basic of all rights is that of children having the right to live with their own families," the report says.

Presently, there are about 200 Willowbrook residents living in foster homes on Staten Island and another 76 residing in nursing homes or with natural parents. There are no group homes for the retarded, although one is near operation at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton.

Experts in mental retardation expect that eventually there will be a need for 30 to 35 group homes (with less than 12 residents) for the retarded Staten Island residents—in and out of Willowbrook.

There are an estimated 8,863 retarded residents living on Staten Island and Willowbrook officials say about 208 of the facility's residents are Islanders. The Review Panel plan, however, only effects residents of Willowbrook, although the service networks that will be developed will be utilized by Island residents also.

The report clearly rejects the current state format whereby placement is done through five separate community service units operating at Willowbrook. The borough retardation office, the report says, must be a separate entity.

The panel predicts "rapid and sustained growth in a wide range of community alternatives," but fears that growth would be "inhibited" if the local retardation office was "structurally dependent" on the developmental center.

A vital function of the borough retardation office would be an "aggressive and energetic" education program directed towards the Staten Island community, the report says.

As a community of predominantly homeowners, the report says, "it can be projected that an intensive community education program will be needed to gain community acceptance...of facilities for the retarded."

The "total involvement of the larger community is an absolute necessity if future dilemmas (like Willowbrook) are to be avoided," the report says, adding that the borough office would have to be "highly visible."

Observers agree that the Department of Mental Hygiene bungled the implementation and public relations surrounding the development of the Tysen St. group home which met significant community opposition.

Dispersal

Upset by the dehumanizing conditions at Willowbrook Developmental Center in 1972, parents and state retardation groups went into federal court and demanded changes, claiming that the constitutional rights of Willowbrook's 5,431 residents were being denied.

A devastating emotion-filled three-year court battle ensued and finally on April 25, 1975, the state agreed to a consent decree which outlined radical changes and the dismantling of Willowbrook.

Where are the 5,431 residents of Willowbrook who were the subjects of the court case?

As the Willowbrook Review Panel's community placement plan points out, the "class" has been dispersed all over the metropolitan area. Until the Review Panel asked, in fact, no one in the Department of Mental Hygiene was quite sure where the "class" had gone.

Before planning community placement, the panel felt, it had to know the characteristics of the former and present retarded residents.

Upon compiling the data, it found out that 318 have died and that 274 have been discharged; that 370 are receiving family care and that 242 live in the community and receive outpatient care. Developmental centers house 4,137 residents, including 2,650 at Willowbrook.

Approximately two thirds of the "class" members are now adults and, thus, the panel knows it must plan to place more adults than children, a large majority who are severely retarded.

Still needed, the panel says, is an analysis of the specific needs of the residents of each borough so that adequate planning can be done on a local basis.

—ROBERT MIRALDI