

Editorial page

# New bureaucracy isn't the answer

The court-appointed Willowbrook Review Panel, named to oversee vitally needed changes in Willowbrook Developmental Center, has come up with a recommendation for five borough offices to be in charge of placement of residents of the center into neighborhoods throughout the city. It sounds very much like a proposal for a brand-new bureaucracy.

There's no doubt at all that conditions at this state institution for the mentally retarded are still far from ideal, even though its population has already declined from 6,000 to 2,650, and it has been mandated that by 1981, 250 be housed there.

Under the plan, the center itself would become one of the placement options open to the borough office.

There's no doubt that until the review panel was mandated, Willowbrook was operated as a tight shop with little outside interference. But this proposal, contained in a 348-page document, would mean five separate offices, each costing millions of dollars to operate, and certain to get strong opposition from state officials beset with fiscal problems.

The plan would make each office independent of the developmental center, so apparently it wants the Island one to be located elsewhere than at Willowbrook. Again, that would entail extra expense.

On the Island, it says, the borough office's vital function would be "an aggressive and energetic" education program toward the Island community to gain community acceptance of facilities for the retarded.

But the Island already has more than its share of such charges, and the challenge should be to restore people to the neighborhoods from which they originally came, so they can be closer to their families if not actually enabled to reside with them.

Right now there are 208 Islanders among those 2,650 residents at Willowbrook — well under 10 per cent of the patient population. And the Island is also providing housing in foster homes and nursing homes for more than 200 people who had been at the center.

There's no doubt that the panel has caused a big change in the bureaucratic attitude toward people like those who have been charges of Willowbrook. And it's all too evident that there is still a great deal to be done. But separatism and autonomy aren't the answer. The problem is a citywide one, and that's how the answers should be sought too.