

New Willowbrook director points to 'miles of progress'

By ROBERT MIRALDI

On March 25, 1975, Harold C. Piepenbrink's first day as director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, he looked with disdain on a small parking lot in front of the center and complained that signs in front of parking spaces had nameplates of persons long gone from Willowbrook.

That is a little thing, Piepenbrink said, but it is symbolic of administrative problems at Willowbrook.

Yesterday, Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd took over as the temporary director of the controversial center where 2,650 retarded residents live. The parking space signs were gone, but no new nameplates had replaced them.

It is a small thing, as Piepenbrink said, but it is symbolic still. Willowbrook has come "miles and miles," progress has been made, Coughlin said yesterday at his inaugural press conference.

"Without making excuses, though, it takes longer than at General Motors to get things done around here," he added.

Just how long, however, will determine in about a month whether attorneys in the precedent-setting Willowbrook court case will seek contempt charges against Gov. Carey and Lawrence C. Kolb, Department of Mental Hygiene commissioner.

In April 1975, Carey and Kolb and plaintiffs for parents groups who had gone into Federal Court demanding change at Willowbrook agreed to a 26-page consent decree, outlining the changes and concurrent dismantling of Willowbrook.

Many deadlines imposed by the decree will expire in April and, Coughlin said, there is a "possibility of contempt." Some of the decree's "major items" will not have been fulfilled, he said, adding that the decree asks for a "helluva lot of things."



Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd, new acting director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, makes a point during his first press conference.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

In his next breath he said that "A lot of things are happening here. I think if the department can show good faith, there will be no contempt."

Department officials, Coughlin said, are "very nervous about any type of hiatus" which might impede progress toward fulfilling the sweeping scope of the consent decree and invite a contempt citation.

Thus, although Coughlin is a deputy commissioner, he will

fill the director's position until a new director is found. "I'll go where the commissioner feels I'm needed," he said.

Piepenbrink, heralded as the answer to Willowbrook's management problems, resigned last week because of ill health. He had undergone major stomach surgery in December and had returned only recently on a part-time basis. His resignation last week came as a surprise to Willowbrook ob-

servers.

Describing himself as a "rah, rah" type of administrator who will "walk the grounds" and be "very visible in the wards," Coughlin, 37, a Brooklyn native, cited our major areas of compliance that concern the department. They are:

Community placement. Coughlin said "our best estimates" indicate that mandated 200 placements by April 30

will be met.

"I could be wrong," he added, but he pointed optimistically to the formation of a Metropolitan Placement Unit, \$6.5 million available for hostel development and a new purchase-of-service contract for community-based care.

"People really don't know what hostels are," said Coughlin, who was responsible for setting up the state's first hostel in 1969 in Watertown, N.Y. There is "tremendous opposition" to placement, he said.

"We have to start breaking down the communities. Each caring for its own. We have a lot of work to do. (Commissioner) Kolb has a great interest in the saturation problem—we don't want the same problem repeated as with mental health facilities."

The department has been severely criticized for its release of over 60,000 patients from state psychiatric hospitals in the past few years, many of whom have ended up in unsupervised, profit-making homes for adults.

The North Shore Coalition, an ad hoc protest committee, has complained about the saturation of the North Shore of Staten Island and has opposed the development of a halfway house for the retarded at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton.

"You hear those same protests all over New York City," Coughlin said. As for meeting the demands of the decree, he said: "We're in pretty good shape."

¶ Staffing: The state, he said, has a "philosophical problem" with education. By April 1, Coughlin said, money will be available to hire another 1,000 staff which will enable the department to meet the decree staff-resident ratios.

"Do we want to hire the 1,000?" Coughlin asks, when the focus of Willowbrook is to place residents in the commu-

nity and the staff will have to be fired when that happens.

At this point, staff is not set up to follow a resident into the community because, Coughlin said, private voluntary agencies are the providers of community care. The money that would have been spent on the resident in the institution will follow him into the community, Coughlin said.

About the present 4,900 Willowbrook staff, he said: "My job will be to help the staff remember what their major concern is—the residents. The business at hand is the care of retarded persons."

Coughlin, who has a retarded daughter, said he hopes that by the time he leaves Willowbrook he will see "smiling kids...in a program."

¶ Education is a real "nitty gritty issue" Coughlin said, stating again the department's position that certain retardates are not "appropriate" for certain education programs. Education is a "broad concept and anything they (the retarded) do is education," he said.

The Willowbrook Review Panel and state officials have had a running argument for over six months about how to define education and to which residents the definition should apply. The dispute is not resolved.

¶ Internal management: Policy manuals covering a wide range of abuses are "fairly good" now, Coughlin said, and there has been a "massive restructuring" of

the facility's bureaucracy, thanks to Piepenbrink.

Coughlin, a former state trooper who has been with the department for less than six months, is unsure of his administrative capability. "I don't know if I'm an administrator," he said.

"I know our main concern here is the retarded. That's what we're here for."

Coughlin is the fourth director at Willowbrook in the past two years.