

He's a Champion of Hostels for Retarded

"The best way to educate the public is to show them success." The Willowbrook Developmental Center's new acting director, Thomas A. Coughlin 3d, was referring to community acceptance of hostels for the mentally retarded in local neighborhoods.

Coughlin, who not only leads the giant Staten Island center for the retarded but also wears the hat of deputy commissioner of the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, was speaking from experience. Prior to going to Albany last September, Coughlin was executive director of the Jefferson County Association for Retarded Children and in that position was responsible for opening the first hostel, or group home for the retarded, in New York State, in Watertown.

A 'Tough' Task

Hostels and their acceptance by communities are increasingly important to New York State. Willowbrook officials are committed by court decree to reduce the center's population roughly 250 by 1981. This means placing the residents in hostels throughout the state, preferably in the neighborhood they came from.

Coughlin conceded that getting the first hostel off the ground in Watertown was "tough."

"But by the time we opened the seventh, by the eighth, then all the way

up to the 11th, which we now have in Jefferson County, there weren't any objections at all," he said.

Coughlin explained that he was at Willowbrook because Harold Piepenbrin, the director, asked to be relieved of the job because of illness. Coughlin already headed the task force in charge of implementing a court decree to improve Willowbrook.

In April 1975 Gov. Carey and Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence G. Kolb and plaintiffs for parents' groups who had gone into Brooklyn Federal Court demanding change at Willowbrook had agreed to the 26 page decree outlining the changes to upgrade Willowbrook over the short term and dismantle the center over the long term.

Cites Big Gains

Will he meet a deadline of June 1 for a series of improvements specified in the decree?

Apparently on some things the answer is yes and on others Coughlin is not sure, but he feels Willowbrook will be able to show a "good faith" effort to comply.

"We have come miles and miles," said the director. "There has been heavy emphasis on the community aspect regarding education and placement. We have started things with money for hostels, money for placement in the metropolitan area, and I think we are in good shape there."

"We have also made massive administration improvements and have saved money to hire more people. The

question remains, do we want to hire 1,000 more people to take care of some number of residents when those residents are being phased out into the community? This is one of the things we will have to take up with the parents."

Coughlin said the next few weeks will be taken up with his getting acquainted with the center.

"I intend to be the visible man around here, visiting the wards, dropping in and out of the buildings to see how things are going. We have enough good administrators here to look after things while I get around," he said.

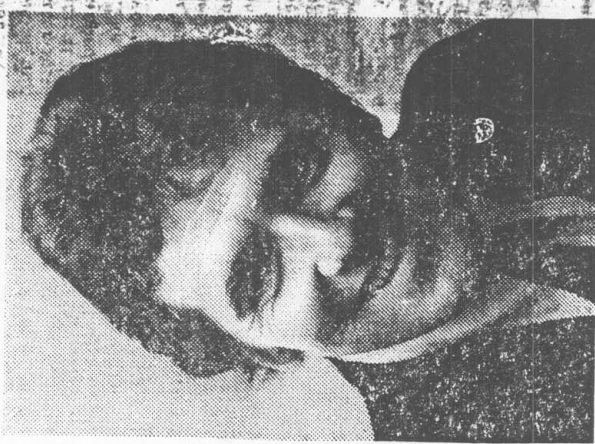
Coughlin, a native of Brooklyn, said his goal for Willowbrook would be to "eventually see lots of smiling kids in programs here at the center. I would like to see staff walking around the grounds feeling proud."

The director said he intended to look into the matter of better security for the grounds. An ex-state trooper, he is aware of the difficulty of patrolling so vast a place as Willowbrook.

"It has both an enormous resident and staff population, some 6,000 people yet here are many who come on the grounds who shouldn't. We will have to look at the best way to control this," he said.

He was responsible for getting the 11 hostels open in Jefferson County, where the population runs about 100,000 people. Watertown has about 38,000 residents.

Staten Island with its population



News photo by Keith Torrey
Willowbrook
Thomas Coughlin, acting director of Willowbrook

of about 325,000, is expected to see its first hostel, the Tysen Street House in West Brighton, open early next year. Next month the house will be used for training the residents for their entrance into community living throughout the five boroughs.

—Mary Engler