

Willowbrook placement plan gets a frosty reception from state

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The Willowbrook Review Panel's proposal to set up five borough offices to supervise community placement of Willowbrook Developmental Center residents has gotten a chilly reaction from the state Department of Mental Hygiene.

In a nine-page document, the department has told the Review Panel that its proposal for Borough Mental Retardation Services Offices "needs further definition and explanation and cannot at this time be accepted or rejected."

The department, in an April 2 letter to the panel, questions the cost of the offices, the administrative overlap they might cause, the additional staff they would require, and the length of time they would take to implement.

"It is apparent that major organizational confusion would result until the new system became fully operational," the department says in its reply to the 348-page Review Panel plan released in mid-March.

Thus, while the Department of Mental Hygiene's reply does not completely reject the Review Panel's proposal, it does ask for time to gauge the effectiveness of the recently established Metropolitan Placement Unit.

Headed by Mrs. Barbara Blum, former regional director of the state Board of Social Welfare, the Metropolitan Unit is responsible for placing 200 retarded Willowbrook residents in community residences by April 30.

Furthermore, the Willowbrook consent decree has ordered the dismantling of Willowbrook from its present 2,650 residents to 250 by 1981. The unit claims in a recent "strategy" paper that it will have an additional 600 residents placed by May 1977.

The department's negative reaction to the panel's placement plan comes as no surprise to Willowbrook observers. The panel and the department have scuffled over placement for almost a year.

Both agree that Willowbrook must be dismantled and that its residents—past and present—can best develop in community residences—hostels, halfway houses, family care homes.

They disagree, however, how placement will take place and who will do the placing and monitoring.

The panel's plan limits placement to group homes, foster homes or developmental centers. "The assumption," the department says in its reply, "that no retarded person can be placed in a facility of over 10 or 15 beds obviously means a complete segregation of the retarded from the nursing home system."

Most of Willowbrook's present residents are profoundly retarded and many are severely handicapped. The department apparently feels that many could best be served in nursing or intermediate care facilities where, additionally, the federal government would pay 50 per cent of the costs.

Money and bureaucracy are

at the root of the department's objection to the Review Panel's borough office plan. "Obviously," the department's reply says, the fiscal and administrative considerations "would be massive and require a great deal of further definition."

One Department of Mental Hygiene source said that the Review Panel's proposal "would add a whole new layer of bureaucracy. And what the Department of Mental Hygiene does not need is more bureaucracy."

"As it is now," the source said, "there is so much bureaucracy, so many panels, so much paper work, almost 40 per cent of the time of Willowbrook employes is spent filling out papers."

The department's reply to the panel report questions whether "such a system could work outside of New York City. It is clear, however, that such a radical reorganization would take years.

"Indeed," the department reply says, "such a change might be beneficial and worth the cost. However, at present its ramifications have not been explored. It is apparent that major organizational confusion would result until the new system became fully operational."

Unless the department and the panel iron out their community placement differences, it is likely that May 7, when the two sides are due in federal court to discuss the Willowbrook consent decree, the issue will be put in front of U.S. District Court Judge Orrin G. Judd.