

Willowbrook reform heading for a showdown

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The year-long battle between the state Department of Mental Hygiene and the Willowbrook Review Panel will likely spill over into federal court again on May 7 and contempt of court citations against top state officials, including Gov. Carey, could result after the court confrontation.

The hearing in Brooklyn has been called by U.S. District Court Judge Orrin G. Judd to measure progress at Willowbrook Developmental Center in implementing a precedent-setting consent decree.

The decree outlines radical, humanizing changes at the 2,650-bed center for the retarded, and many of the decree-ordered changes must be implemented by April 30, others by May 31.

Interviews with state and Willowbrook officials and others familiar with the center's operations indicate it is highly unlikely that the Department of Mental Hygiene will meet the court-sanctioned deadlines.

"No, we will not be completely out of compliance," says Dr. Samuel Ornstein, deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene and boss of the Willowbrook Task Force. "As for implementing the whole document, it is unlikely because it is such a complicated document."

"There are literally hundreds of subsections," Dr. Ornstein says, adding about the decree which was signed April 21, 1975, that, "Whether the parts add up to a good whole, I'm not sure."

Like the decree or not, however, the department is under a federal court order to implement it. A lack of "substantial compliance" would surely lead to contempt of court proceedings, say attorneys in the



Commissioner Lawrence Kolb, who may be a target of contempt proceedings, is shown here on a Feb. 3, 1975, visit to Willowbrook. The Willowbrook resident was helmeted to protect him from self-inflicted abuse.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons