

Kolb admits center not meeting mandate

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The commissioner of the state Department of Mental Hygiene admitted yesterday that Willowbrook Developmental Center would "not meet all the requirements" imposed by the U.S. District Court.

But, said Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb at a Manhattan press conference, there has been "vast improvement in the (Willowbrook) environment" and "substantial efforts toward compliance have been made."

Dr. Kolb said he felt enough progress had been made "to satisfy the court as to (the) intent" of the Department of Mental Hygiene in its year-long effort to meet federal requirements. The deadline for many of those requirements is April 30; for others May 31.

Numerous Willowbrook observers have discussed the possibility of contempt of court citations against top state officials, including Dr. Kolb and Gov. Carey, if the federal requirements of the Willowbrook consent decree are not met.

Plaintiffs who brought about

the precedent-setting decree by instituting court action four years ago will be back in Brooklyn Federal Court May 7 when Judge Orrin Judd has asked state officials for a progress report on implementing the 26-page decree which was signed by Carey on April 21, 1975.

The announcement by Kolb yesterday was not the first by a state official that Willowbrook would not meet the federal deadlines. Acting Willowbrook Director Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd and Dr. Samuel Ornstein, both deputy commissioners, told the Advance recently that the deadlines would not be met.

But Kolb's statement came as a surprise to some department officials who had no knowledge of either the press conference or the content of Kolb's statement.

The commissioner, who last visited Willowbrook Feb. 19, 1975, said he intends to tour the facility again within a week. In response to questions, Kolb said he didn't know the number of present Willowbrook residents (there are 2,650), but said that of the

May 7 hearing the state would have all details on progress at the 384-acre center.

In his prepared statement, Kolb said "a detailed summary of our efforts" at Willowbrook "should properly await the outcome of the court hearings."

"I think it's fair to note that the department, after an admittedly slow start, has begun to make considerable progress in all areas of the decree."

Kolb cited the newly established Metropolitan Placement Unit, which is responsible for coordinating the placement of 200 residents in the community facilities by May 1, and added that for "those who remain at Willowbrook, conditions have been markedly improved with expenditures for staff and environmental improvements."

Kolb told reporters grouped in Gov. Carey's Manhattan office that "vast improvements" had been made at Willowbrook in feeding, education and recreation programs.

"Much needs to be done," Kolb said, pointing specifically to "serious staff problems...and a 30 per cent turnover" in Willowbrook's 4,215-member staff.

The ostensible reason for yesterday's press conference, also attended by Dr. Kevin Cahill, Carey's top health adviser, was to discuss a \$24-million budget chop suffered by the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Kolb said the cuts would not affect Willowbrook and that the department would not allow the chops "to be used as an excuse for maintaining the status quo."

The cuts, he said, would mean that upstate developmental centers for the retarded will not be afforded the same improvements that are under way at Willowbrook. A total of 1,300 staff members would now be denied those centers, he said.

Department of Mental Hygiene observers have said that parents with children at state developmental centers are becoming upset with all the focus of money and staff at Willowbrook and, some observers fear, another court suit, similar to the Willowbrook case, could be instituted.