

Willowbrook chief hit with questions ...and complaints

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Resentment about preferential treatment to residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center and injustices in the state's funding system for handicapped persons living in the community were laid in the lap yesterday of Acting Willowbrook Director Thomas Coughlin.

"I know some of the problems," Coughlin said as he addressed the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disability Council in the Occupational Training Center in New Brighton.

Whatever problems he was not aware of, however, Coughlin probably learned yesterday as council members peppered the Department of Mental Hygiene deputy commissioner with questions and complaints.

Coughlin had to exit the council meeting in the middle of a debate over the controversial Tysen St. halfway house in New Brighton which is surfacing as a heated issue again because, some council members feel, the house is not going to be used for retarded Staten Island residents.

But before he left, Coughlin fielded questions from beleaguered representatives of Staten Island mental health agencies, all of whom are faced with shrinking funds and growing patient rolls.

Part of the problem seems to stem from what Coughlin admits is an "injustice" in the state system which provides 100 per cent funding for present and former residents of mental health and retardation centers, but only 50 per cent for handicapped persons who live at home.

One exasperated parent pleaded with Coughlin yesterday: "What do I have to do to get my son into a sheltered workshop, put him in an institution?"

The woman complained that her son was not able to enter a workshop because Willowbrook residents were being given preference.

Coughlin promised that department Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb would shortly appoint a task force to address the injustices in state funding.

Furthermore, Coughlin said in response to questions, the department should begin staff sharing with community agencies that would allow for a pooling of staff as Willowbrook residents continue to be dispersed into community residences.

Willowbrook is under a federal court order to reduce its present 2,650 population to 250 by 1981. As the Willowbrook retardates flood the communities, taxing community agencies, Coughlin envisions staff flowing with the exodus.

Just what staff will follow the residents, however, will be a problem for the next Willowbrook director to face, said Coughlin, who is filling the director's post until a new administrator is found.

"If the new director doesn't agree with staff sharing, we would have to have a little talk about it," Coughlin said.

About the present funding setup, Coughlin said he felt it would eventually be changed so that the state would pay 75 per cent of a community agency's budget.

Currently, he said, about \$400 million is spent on institutional services and \$25 million on community services. "The trick," Coughlin said, "is to reverse the numbers as people are shifted" from institution to community.

The funding problem is a logical outgrowth of the recent state policy to depopulate the developmental and psychiatric centers and allow people to reside again in home communities, receiving care on a local level.

About the Tysen St. group home, slated to begin this month as a training center and eventually to become a permanent residence, the council yesterday passed a resolution to back again Tysen St. as a residence for only Staten Island residents.

The Willowbrook Benevolent Society, which will run the home, apparently has also been training Queens residents for group home living. Anthony Pinto, the group's president, said, however, that the Queens residents would reside in Queens, not Tysen St. Pinto opposed the council resolution.

In other matters, council chairman Mrs. Beatrice Victor read a letter from Isabel Sklar, hostel coordinator for the Department of Mental Hygiene, which said that a "re-review" of a proposed hostel on Westervelt Ave., New Brighton, has been requested.

The state had originally agreed to license the hostel, but later reneged when it said it would be too costly a project. Coughlin agreed with Mrs. Victor that "stupidity" was involved in the Westervelt case.