

Willowbrook Review Panel

hears rehash of complaints

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Most observers called it a case of *deja vu*. Others called a waste of time. No matter who you believe, however, there was little accomplished yesterday at the Willowbrook Review Panel's third open hearing.

Slated to give parents and others concerned with the operation of Willowbrook Developmental Center an opportunity to speak their piece, the federal court-appointed panel sat through another two-and-one-half-hour barrage of rhetoric about conditions at the center for the retarded.

The seven-member panel's first two hearings were much the same—criticism, pleas for help, attacks on the panel's slow rate of progress, requests for jobs and emotional critiques of society.

It is likely that the minds of the panel members wandered to what Review Panel member Murray Schneps yesterday called the "first round," a confrontation with the state Department of Mental Hygiene that is scheduled for 2 p.m. Friday in U.S. District Court, Brooklyn.

On that day, the state will have to tell Judge Orrin G. Judd what progress has been made in implementing a federal consent decree that was agreed to April 30, 1975. The state was to have placed 200 Willowbrook residents into community residences by last Saturday.

Last Friday, Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb refused comment on the deadline, saying: "We have a date in court this Friday."

Although Schneps comment-

ed at the hearing yesterday that the state could be "moving a helluva lot faster," the panel made no comment on the deadlines that expired Friday or the deadlines that must be met by May 31.

The panel did outline what it considers an important new procedure that will safeguard the rights of residents who the state wishes to transfer to other developmental centers.

The federal order mandates reducing Willowbrook's present 2,650 population to 250 by 1981 by placing residents in community facilities—hostels and halfway houses or in foster care.

The Department of Mental Hygiene has not quarrelled with that objective, but has attempted to reduce the Willowbrook population via "step transfers"—transferring residents to other centers while community facilities are being readied.

The Review Panel has objected, but Judge Judd ruled that the transfers were valid if written plans by the department demonstrated that the alternative center offered a better environment; if the resident was given due process, could object and be offered a hearing to state his objections, and if the panel and resident were given 30 days notice before transfer.

"The importance of the mechanism," panel member Michael Lottman said, "is that it gives the resident and parent the ability to decide" if the new environment is "the least restrictive available."

Reportedly, a number of Willowbrook residents are to be transferred to the Manhattan Developmental Center, and a fight is brewing over

whether that center is any better than Willowbrook.

To hear the 12 persons who testified yesterday tell it, it would not take much for another facility to offer a better environment than Willowbrook.