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Our opinion

Progress lags at Willowbrook

Four years after parent groups began a legal battle to improve conditions at Willowbrook Developmental Center and more than a year after they obtained a Federal Court decree, the groups are vowing to seek contempt of court citations against top officials of the state Department of Mental Hygiene.

They allege that the Willowbrook Review Panel formed as a result of the decree has found that compliance with the staff additions and other changes ordered by the court have been "almost nil."

Thomas Coughlin, deputy commissioner of the department and acting director of Willowbrook, admits that less than half the staffing ordered and a little over a quarter of the environmental changes decreed have been effected. The Review Panel disputes his report on community placement of Willowbrook's charges, and said that some of them were done without the required conference with the resident and the resident's parents. Also, the requirement that 200 of the center's residents have been placed in communities has not been achieved by the deadline, May 1.

The parents also charge that closure of a surgical-medical building at the institution has resulted in patients with behavior problems being shifted to buildings whose staffs weren't prepared to handle them.

Federal Judge Orrin C. Judd has set a hearing for July 23 to get a report on just what changes ordered are not affected by June 1. It's a foregone conclusion that quite a few of them won't be achieved.

There were 2,600 residents at the center last December. Now there are 2,650. That's progress?

The appointment early last year of Dr. Lawrence Kolb, an internationally recognized authority on mental care, as the new commissioner of Mental Hygiene was hailed by many as a step toward solutions instead of excuses. But it's all too apparent that the bureaucracy is still dragging its feet.