

Report notes Willowbrook status

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Buried at the end of nearly 600 pages of letters, audits and critical findings, the Willowbrook Developmental Center Review Panel's most recent report foreshadows the next major event in the continuing saga of the 2,600-bed Staten Island facility for the retarded.

The report says the panel "expects to be in a position by the time of the July 23 hearing in this case to make specific suggestions for facilitating implementation and enforcement" of the Willowbrook consent decree which blueprints steps and standards that must be implemented at the center.

The 21-page decree was signed in April 1975 by Gov. Carey and, along with standards of care, the decree set deadlines, most of which have not been met by the state Department of Mental Hygiene.

On Friday the Review Panel and attorneys for parents in the case were expected to seek contempt citations against top state and mental hygiene officials for not meeting those deadlines. The death of Federal Judge Orrin G. Judd, however, has postponed the hearing until a new judge is assigned and becomes familiar with the complex case.

When the hearing is held, before the summer is out, the panel will probably ask the court to order one of the following options:

□ Have state officials jailed and/or fined.

□ Have responsibility for decision-making at the center transferred to the panel itself.

□ Have a court-appointed master enter the picture and direct the institution.

Whatever the outcome of the contempt proceedings and whatever option the panel chooses to seek, there will be one basic issue at stake: Are officials at Willowbrook and of the Department of Mental Hygiene administratively capable of implementing the consent decree?

Management has been and continues to be the overriding problem at the sprawling center, which continues to be plagued by a wide range of problems, most stemming from poor management.

When contempt is sought, panel officials and attorneys assure, it will not be to embarrass officials. It will be to speed up the humanization and concurrent dismantling of Willowbrook.

The obvious theme of the Review Panel's last report, issued last week, was that Willowbrook's management continues to be deficient—from supplying clothing, to dismantling a psychiatric ward to re-vamping the internal management of the facility.

"Perhaps," the report states, "the only area of the (consent decree) with respect to which any sort of high level planning or management capability has been demonstrated is that relating to community placement."

Otherwise, the report indicates, Willowbrook is still mismanaged. Some Willowbrook officials say the facility is no better today—in management terms—than it was four years ago when parents' groups instituted their case in federal court.

Certainly, there have been cosmetic changes in the wards; improvements in the food; improvements in programs; and most importantly, a reduction of the population from 6,000 to 2,600.

But management problems are still evident, much as they were when Dr. Miodrag Ristig, the Yugoslavian-born psychiatrist, was running the facility in 1974. Ristig was pressured out by mental hygiene officials who said he was an "incompetent administrator."

When Ristig was transferred, a frantic search ensued for a top-flight administrator who could shape up the "unmanageable" 387-acre center. Griffenhagen-Kroeger, a San Francisco management firm, was hired to analyze the center's problems, which it did in two massive reports which have been filed away and rarely, if ever, used.

Harold Piepenbrink was eventually lured from Chicago with a reputation as a "management whiz." He drastically altered the facility's internal structure. A stomach operation forced him out of the director's post in March.

Since that time, Thomas A. Coughlin, a deputy director, has been holding the director's post. Coughlin is a former state trooper who made his name in mental health circles by directing an upstate community placement operation. He has had no background as an administrator and, Willowbrook observers have said repeatedly, he was "in over his head" at Willowbrook.

The observers have pointed to the dismantling of the center's psychiatric ward as a classic example of poor management. Coughlin told his aides to disperse the ward's residents into other wards. Despite repeated Review Panel requests, however, there was no plan developed for staff to follow the disturbed residents.

The result was numerous injuries to residents and a scared corps of staffers. The dispersal, according to panel chairman Dr. James Clements, was "precipitous, poorly planned and essentially disastrous."

Even Coughlin admitted when he took over Willowbrook: "I don't know if I'm a good administrator." The panel apparently does not think so.

With Coughlin back in Albany as a deputy director, the administrative chores now fall to Dr. Levester Cannon, who has never directed a facility. Chances are, the Review Panel will not wait to see if he can satisfactorily run Willowbrook but will proceed with plans to take the facility out of the hands of the state's most controversial bureaucracy, the Department of Mental Hygiene.