

Editorial page

Our opinion

A court's choice for Willowbrook?

The apparent unprovoked attack last week on a 40-year-old female physician at Willowbrook Developmental Center has served to emphasize again that problems at the 2,595-bed institute for the retarded continue to abound.

The assailant in this case was an 18-year-old psychotic resident who had been dispersed into residential buildings after the center's psychiatric unit had been abolished at the order of Mental Hygiene Deputy Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin.

The psychiatric ward, said Mr. Coughlin, was too costly, too unwieldy and too unproductive. The subsequent dispersal, however, was "precipitous, poorly planned (and) essentially disastrous," according to the Willowbrook Review Panel.

Mr. Coughlin is the former acting director at the center who said that Willowbrook was indeed "administratively out of control." And it is Mr. Coughlin, observers feel, who must shoulder the blame for the latest assault, one of almost 100 incidents caused by dispersed psychiatric patients.

This fall in federal court, parents groups will be seeking action against Mr. Coughlin and other state officials for not complying with federal court rules to shape up the center.

Perhaps it is finally time to think seriously about bringing in a federal court-appointed master to oversee Willowbrook and make the decisions. A master would presumably have no vested political or bureaucratic interests.

The state Department of Mental Hygiene has stumbled at Willowbrook for years. The Willowbrook resident and the taxpayer deserve quicker, more humanizing progress.