

Trial of mental health officials is postponed; court gives no reason

The trial of three top state mental health officials who are charged with failing to implement changes at Willowbrook Developmental Center has been postponed to Jan. 3.

A law clerk for U.S. District Court Judge John R. Bartels confirmed last night that the trial of Department of Mental Hygiene Commissioner Dr. Lawrence C. Kolb, Deputy Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin and Regional Director Dr. Alvin M. Mesnikoff will not begin Tuesday as scheduled.

The clerk refused to give a reason for the postponement.

At a hearing earlier this week before Bartels in his Brooklyn courtroom, attorneys for the defendants had requested a postponement. Bartels denied the defense motion.

However, yesterday afternoon there was a pre-trial conference among the judge, the three defendants and attorneys for parents groups who have

charged the officials with contempt. It could not be learned yesterday who asked for the postponement or why.

In an interview yesterday before the postponement was announced, an attorney for the parents, Chris A. Hansen, said that witness lists filed by both sides indicated that a three-week trial was probable.

The contempt charges stem from an agreement that was reached in federal court between the parents and the state in April 1975. The state Department of Mental Hygiene agreed to make radical changes at Willowbrook. The deadlines for most of those changes was April and May of of this year.

Many of the changes were not made and the parents' attorneys charged the state's top officials with contempt of court and suggested fines and imprisonment.

—ROBERT MIRALDI