

# Willowbrook parents can claim a victory

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The word from Albany that the state's Department of Mental Hygiene is setting up a separate bureau to deal with the problems of mental retardation represents a clear-cut victory for parents of residents at Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Ever since the scandal of Willowbrook began to emerge early in this decade, parent and consumer groups have lobbied for a breakup of the country's largest mental health bureaucracy and criticized it for waste, inefficiency, disorganization and, most important in their eyes, poor care.

Legislative efforts to effect the breakup have been thwarted — vetoed, in fact, last year by Gov. Carey. It took a class-action civil suit filed by Willowbrook

parents in federal court in 1972 and, finally, a threat of jail sentences in the last month to force the state to make the change.

Undoubtedly the breakup, which is expected to be announced after Jan. 1 by Gov. Carey, would not have come without the threat of stiff action by the federal courts.

In April 1975 the Willowbrook parents and state officials reached an agreement to make radical changes at Willowbrook, the Staten Island center for 2,595 retarded persons. The state subsequently failed to make those changes within a year, the agreed deadline.

The parents' attorneys charged contempt of court: asked for a trial of top state officials Federal Judge John R. Bartels then said that jail sentences would not be ruled out.

Now, however, it seems unlikely that a trial will ever take place, even though

one is scheduled for Feb. 4. Parents' attorneys were seeking change in the state's bureaucratic structure, not jail terms for officials.

Specifically, parents' attorneys were seeking removal of Dr. Lawrence C. Kolb as commissioner of the mental hygiene bureaucracy. Reportedly they have had their wish granted, and Thomas A. Coughlin, former Willowbrook director, is set to head the new retardation bureau.

Coughlin, 38, earned his spurs by setting up a first-class community-based program for the retarded residents of upstate Jefferson County. He won kudos for his work with the State Association for Retarded Children.

Then last year he switched sides and joined the Department of Mental Hygiene where, he felt, he could do more for the retarded. He filled in for four months at Willowbrook while the state sought a permanent director.

Coughlin has, a retarded child and knows the pain and trauma associated with raising a developmentally disabled offspring in a state where adequate services are often not available.

In testimony in federal court, Coughlin's positions on retardation issues have seemed remarkably similar to the positions of parents' attorneys. Coughlin intimated that Kolb had thwarted his efforts at Willowbrook.

The long nightmare at Willowbrook is far from over. The state's pledges for care levels have still not been met and the process of reducing the center's population to 250 by 1981 is going slowly.

But, at least in some quarters, there are signs of relief that a victory has been assured. "that progress may be speedier and that the bureaucracy may respond more efficiently" to the needs of the retarded.



Thomas A. Coughlin