

Willowbrook losing ground, panel finds

From last May to October, Willowbrook Developmental Center made "less progress" toward improving the quality of life and care at the Staten Island center for the retarded than at any time in the past 18 months, "and indeed...previous gains may have been lost."

That is the conclusion reached by the Willowbrook Review Panel based on reports filed by Willowbrook staff and by the panel's audits of the center. The conclusions are part of a 168-page report, delivered last week to Federal Judge John R. Bartels.

In an interview yesterday, however, Willowbrook's director, Dr. Levester Cannon took issue with the Review Panel's findings. "My personal interpretation," Cannon said, leafing through the report, "is that it is garbage."

Cannon attacked the panel's auditing methods, saying that many of its findings were outdated, incorrect and "lifted out of context." He said he saw "no useful purpose" to the report.

"I just don't know what they are talking about," Cannon said.

Confronted with Cannon's comments, a spokesman said yesterday that the panel has "no doubts whatsoever" about its conclusions and that "instead of taking a cheap shot through the press" Cannon should take the opportunity to "discuss his difficulties" with the Review Panel.

Among the "difficulties" Cannon has encountered in his seven-month tenure at Willowbrook are understaffing, overcrowding and thefts of a wide range of equipment.

Cannon estimated that 35 to 40 per cent of the center's equipment is being stolen and that the taxpayer-funded center is losing \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year because of the pilferage. He called the theft problem "incredible" and said

new security measures thus far have failed.

The Review Panel's report said that in the six-month period surveyed, staffing shortages "appeared striking" and had "far-reaching negative implications." The personnel deficiencies were "contributory to many other problems," the report said.

Cannon said that staff deficiencies were "just about corrected," and that Willowbrook was still hiring 80 new staff a month. "I'm comfortable saying that the staffing deficit now is small," Cannon said.

The report criticized the quality of many of the center's staff. About staff quality, Cannon said: "You have to take your chances. The quality will go up when the population goes down."

How quickly the population goes down will depend in great measure on the efforts of the state's Metropolitan Placement Unit, established to develop community residences and programs for the 3,200 former and present residents of Willowbrook.

The Review Panel's report said "a number of serious state-level organizational and policy barriers" are slowing the placement effort.

Among the reasons for the slow placement effort, the report said, are problems with city and state building codes and zoning regulations; problems with the Facilities Development Corp., the state agency responsible for architectural review and lease negotiations for community residences; problems with landlords fearful of renting space for the retarded, and delays in issuance of operating certificates by two state agen-

cies.

Attempts by the state Department of Mental Hygiene to solve the problems, the report said, have met with "limited success." The Review Panel said suggestions it has made to Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb have been rejected.

As it has in the past, the Review Panel criticized the Department of Mental Hygiene, which has the major responsibility for implementing changes at Willowbrook which the state agreed to make 18 months ago.

The panel said there is "a lack of leadership, authority, direction, control and supervision at the highest levels of the Department of Mental Hygiene...This problem is aggravated by a general lack of interest in, or knowledge of, appropriate management techniques."

Gov. Carey in his State of the State message last week, announced a break-up of the Department of Mental Hygiene into two independent bureaus, one for mental health and one for mental retardation. Persistent problems at Willowbrook, observers have said, was one of the reasons for the split.

The Review Panel has already asked Judge Bartels (in an Oct. 28 letter) to order Gov. Carey to appoint a special expediter to speed progress at Willowbrook and to coordinate the efforts of the six state agencies needed to make changes at the 384-acre center.

The change needed, the Review Panel's latest report indicated, are still numerous. "Spot gains" have been made, "visible change continued," but that change has been "overshadowed and negated by the glaring nature of (other) serious deficiencies."

—ROBERT MIRALDI