

Carey mental health plan questioned

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ALBANY — Action on a plan to split the Department of Mental Hygiene into three new units may have to be delayed until next year because of serious questions about the proposal's impact on mental health services in the state.

Senate Mental Hygiene Committee Chairman Frank Padavan, R-Queens, said after a five-hour public hearing yesterday he doubts whether objections and concerns voiced over the proposed DMH reorganization could be resolved in time for the Legislature to act on the plan this year.

"Right now we have more questions than answers, and we're not going to act on anything until we get some answers," Padavan said. "Very frankly, I don't think we'll be able to resolve this in the few months left in our session."

Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, shared Padavan's feelings but said she personally would like to see the plan approved this year.

"There is a lot of opposition to this plan, and it could very well drag on into next year," Mrs. Connelly said. "But there is a need for change and I would like to see some action before we leave here this year."

Under the reorganization plan, unveiled by Gov. Carey in January, the

DMH would be split into three separate offices responsible for mental health, developmental disabilities and alcohol and drug abuse. Each office would be headed by a commissioner who would oversee each unit's activities.

DMH Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb, testifying at yesterday's hearing, said the proposed reorganization would assist the state in its efforts to provide better care for mentally ill and disabled New Yorkers.

"The plan is a reflection of what is already well under way within the department at this time, and that is a recognition of the uniqueness of the problems of the developmentally disabled as opposed to those of the mentally ill," Kolb said.

Kolb and Deputy Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd also argued that the reorganization would save money and would result in better care for persons with more than one disability, such as those with both psychiatric and retardation problems.

But several individuals challenged the latter assertion, contending that individuals with multiple disabilities could be caught up between the Office for Mental Health and the Office for Developmental Disabilities and receive less than adequate care.

"I'm in favor of the division of the department because it will make it easier to identify some individuals with particular problems," said Dr. Michael

Lowitt, chief of the multiple disabilities unit at the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens. "But someone is going to have to be made responsible for caring for those with multiple disabilities."

Other objections were raised over the reorganization plan's call for the consolidation of the Office of Drug Abuse Services with the Division of Alcoholism, now a part of the DMH.

Sister Josephine Connolly, representative of the New York State Council of Alcoholism, said that various alcohol abuse treatment programs should be kept independent under the DMH split-up.

"While the problems of alcohol and drug abuse are both addictions, the treatment of each is separate and distinct," Sister Connolly said. "We therefore think it becomes imperative to have a separate office for alcohol abuse, with independent lines of authority and budgetary powers."

Several persons, including Assemblywoman Connelly, expressed concern that the creation of three new offices, each headed by a commissioner, could turn the state's mental hygiene programs into a bureaucratic mess.

"I'm afraid we could create some kind of monster no one would be directly accountable for anything," Mrs. Connelly said.

Both Padavan and Mrs. Connelly em-

phasized after yesterday's hearing that there are no substantial political differences between either themselves or Senate Republicans and Assembly Democrats over the proposed reorganization.

Any delay in approving the DMH split-up, they said, would likely result from the inability of the Legislature, Carey and DMH officials to resolve problems with the plan before the end of the current legislative session.

"We don't expect any quick answers because, after all, we are talking about reorganizing an agency with a \$1-billion budget," Padavan said.

Mrs. Connelly said she and Padavan will conduct another hearing on the reorganization plan March 10 at 10 a.m. in the 44th floor hearing room at 2 World Trade Center in Manhattan.