

Closing Willowbrook by 1981 is suggested

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — The state Department of Mental Hygiene is considering giving up the sprawling Willowbrook Developmental Center in 1981 after the facility's resident population is reduced to 250, according to a departmental report made public yesterday.

The report, outlining plans for the department's programs and facilities over the next five years, said officials should actively explore the possibility of shuttering Willowbrook and moving the remaining patients to a new facility somewhere on Staten Island.

As another option, the report recommended the elimination of all but nine of Willowbrook's 75 existing buildings and about 130 of the 180 acres the facility now occupies. The 250 residents would then be housed in the remaining buildings on the remaining acreage.

A spokesman for Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb said the proposals are "just thoughts that were thrown out on the table," although he indicated that those suggestions and others are being considered by department officials.

"Any final determination on what we're going to will probably have to wait until we're down the road a few years," the spokesman said.

The thick DMH report, which the department had to prepare under the terms of legislation approved last year, covers the agency's future plans in general terms but goes into specifics for a handful of facilities, including Willowbrook.

Under a 1975 court decree, DMH officials must gradually reduce Willowbrook's population from the current level of more than 2,000 to only 250 by 1981. The report released yesterday recommends that facilities at the institution be gradually phased out as the population declines.

Phase One of the plan, which would go into effect when the population is just over 1,900, calls for the shuttering of several residence buildings and the possible closing of staff housing on the grounds at Willowbrook.

The plan's second phase, for use when the population falls to around 1,000, calls

for the closing of a dozen buildings and the release of about 80 acres of land. The final phase calls for the closure of all but nine buildings and the freeing of all of Willowbrook's land except for about 47 acres.

According to the report, the nine buildings and 47 acres would have to be maintained only if officials decided to keep the remaining 250 Willowbrook residents on the institution's grounds. But even those buildings and land could be released if the state decided to build a new facility elsewhere on the Island, the report said.

Kolb's spokesman, Robert Spoor, said the department will probably follow the report's suggestion that facilities at Willowbrook be gradually phased out as the resident population declines.

He added, however, that a final determination of the future of the Willowbrook property will be up to DMH and the state Office of General Services.

Under normal procedures, Spoor explained, DMH would have to declare all or part of the property surplus before any further action could occur. General Services officials would then see if any other governmental agencies were interested in using the facility.

If no agencies were interested, the property could be sold with or without the buildings intact, Spoor added. He said it has not yet been decided whether the procedure would be carried out in phases or if all action would be delayed until the population is reduced to 250.

The report said DMH officials plan to reduce the resident population at all of the agency's developmental centers from 19,284 to 10,500 by 1981, while the number of residents at psychiatric centers will fall from 30,900 to about 21,650.

The population reductions will be achieved by returning some residents to their families and by placements in community residences and intermediate care facilities and nursing homes, the report said.

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