

# Willowbrook observers are split on new state decree

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Social change is rarely achieved quickly or easily. That fact has certainly been underscored at Willowbrook Developmental Center, where a five-year battle to improve the life of retarded persons continues to be waged.

Another milestone in the battle was reached last week when state officials, under pressure in a federal court, signed still another document promising speedier results.

There are ironies, pitfalls and intricacies to the latest 28-point agreement pressed on the state by attorneys for parents and advocates for the retarded. The document's thrust, however, is similar to that of the precedent-setting decree — the Willowbrook Consent Judgment — signed by state officials in April 1975.

It seeks, first, to force improvements at Willowbrook, where vexing problems remain and where conditions are still below acceptable.

More significantly perhaps, the new agreement attempts to speed up the move to place present and former Willowbrook residents in community living facilities. The pace of that movement has been thus far excruciatingly slow.

What the state has agreed to do — place 1,950 Willowbrook residents into the community by 1979 — is an ambitious endeavor, especially considering that in the past two years the state has only been able to place about 380 persons from Willowbrook into the community.

Nevertheless, state officials have given their pledge. It is the same type of pledge which got those officials hauled into court on contempt charges for not fulfilling their pledges of April 1975. In six months or a year, will those officials be back before Federal Judge John R. Bartels, charged with contempt again?

Willowbrook observers are split on whether the latest community placement commitments can be met at all, let alone with the degree of quality called for in the Willowbrook Consent Judgment and that will undoubtedly be demanded by the Willowbrook Review Panel.

"Based on what we are doing now — about 40 or 50 placements a month —

the estimates look a bit high," admits Thomas A. Coughlin, commissioner of the state's division for retardation. "But sometimes your reach has to exceed your grasp."

Much of the burden for making placements will fall on the shoulders of Barbara Blum, a deputy state commissioner who directs the New York City regional retardation office and heads the Metropolitan Placement Unit, which is directly responsible for making placements.

The goals "should be attainable," Mrs. Blum says, although she admits they are "very ambitious." They will not be attained, however, she says, without a "massive change" in the present placement system.

The state, she says, is still "straining to shift the system" from one which has focused on institutional care to one which offers a network of community living and treatment facilities.

The Willowbrook Review Panel, for one, has expressed reservations about the commitments made by the state. The panel questioned Coughlin at a meeting two weeks ago and found that he "indicated rather strongly" that the state "did not feel it could meet the increased projections."

"We do not see what is to be gained by this exercise," panel attorney Michael S. Lottman wrote Judge Bartels. "It makes no sense for the (state) to stipulate to projections it does not intend or expect to meet."

The stipulations do much more, however, than just set timetables for placement. Last week's agreement is geared to speeding up the placement process as well as insuring that those people placed in the community will be protected from abuse; it is aimed at preventing "dumping," the kind which has taken places with discharges from state psychiatric centers.

In fact, 15 of the 28 stipulations deal with community placement issues. They include:

☐ The state must hire 140 case management specialists who will provide "direct ongoing case coordination for

community clients." Essentially, the specialists will follow Willowbrook residents into the community and insure the treatment they receive is adequate.

☐ Strict timetables are imposed on the Facilities Development Corp., the state agency which inspects and reviews potential living sites for the retarded. The FDC has been proceeding at a snail's pace, observers say.

☐ The state must develop adequate funding for community protection and advocacy plans; for private agencies that wish to develop residences for the retarded, and for individuals who wish to adopt retarded persons.

☐ The state must contract with an outside agency to develop a toilet training program for the center's current residences. The move is significant because it emphasizes the urgent need for such a program.

Before a retarded person can hope to learn daily living skills needed for community placement, observers stress, they must be toilet trained. It is an essential first step. The observers also stress that any retarded person, no matter what his level of physical or mental disability, is capable of being toilet trained. It is a program that has been neglected at Willowbrook, however, and one that is a key to the future.

Bruce Ennis, an attorney for the parents who has been at the forefront of the five-year battle, will not predict what the future will bring for Willowbrook, but he is pleased with the latest agreement. It's "main thrust," he stresses, "is the community effort." It is in the community where progress has to be made if Willowbrook is to become manageable and have a population of 250 by 1981.

Ennis and his colleagues are pleased with what they see as the "good faith" efforts of state officials in trying to bring about meaningful change for Willowbrook's residents. What they and other observers of the process are becoming increasingly aware of, is that social change is painfully slow.