

State mental agency split subject of disagreement

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The head of the state's division on mental retardation came to Staten Island yesterday to do some lobbying for Gov. Carey's proposal to split the state's Mental Hygiene Department into three autonomous divisions.

At least one member of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, who expressed sentiments that have been voiced around the state, was unconvinced by the words of Thomas A. Coughlin.

Robert Piegari, an administrator of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Council, told Coughlin and council members that Carey's proposal "is just a shuffling of cards," and does not accomplish what mental retardation advocate groups have long sought.

Coughlin, who said he has been hearing that contention for six months, demurred. "I don't believe," Coughlin said about an opposition bill being offered by State Sen. William Conklin of Brooklyn, "that the Conklin offers as much as the Carey proposal."

Coughlin then implied that if the Conklin bill passed the State Legislature (as it has in past years), Gov. Carey might veto the Brooklyn senator's attempt to split the Department of Mental Hygiene into divisions for mental health, mental retardation and drug abuse-alcoholism.

"If the Conklin bill passes," Coughlin said, the whole plan to split mental health services "may have to be scrapped for this administration." Gov. Carey is up for reelection next year and, Coughlin indicated, he might not want to

get into a reorganization fight in an election year.

In other council developments:

¶ A spokesman for the Volunteers of America said the group will be seeking to locate an apartment for 12 retarded Staten Islanders in the Arlington Terrace Apartments (formerly North Shore Plaza) in Mariners Harbor.

¶ Piegari announced that the plan to provide bus service for Staten Island's elderly and disabled population is still stalled because the city withdrew an offer of five drivers needed to get the bus program off the ground.

In outlining the differences between the Carey and Conklin proposals, Coughlin said the main distinction seems to be "where the office sits administratively."

Conklin has proposed that a separate division on mental retardation be placed in the executive branch of government. The Conklin people, Coughlin said, "feel that retardation has to be placed completely away from the field of psychiatry."

Under Carey's proposal, the present Department of Mental Hygiene, which has almost 200,000 clients and 63,000 employees, would be split into three departments with separate commissioners who would make all decisions, including budget, relating to their sphere.

Piegari told Coughlin, however: "If mental retardation wants to get ahead, it has to be put in a different place from mental health."

Advocates in the field of care for the mentally retarded and the developmentally disabled have long said that the problems of their clients are so different that the state regulatory bureaucracy must be separate from mental health.

Coughlin, former acting director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, already has nominal authority over the division for retardation; but, significantly, he said yesterday, he still cannot control budget matters for the division.

Coughlin said that the Carey proposal would also enable localities to run mental retardation programs and still be funded by the state and would make other major changes in state financing for persons who had been residents of state developmental centers.

After Coughlin departed, Beatrice Victor, former chairman of the council, discussed a matter which the board has been hearing for three years — the Volunteers of America proposal to establish a group residence for 12 Staten Islanders.

The group has painstakingly sought a site for the residence, only to be shot down twice by state building code regulations. This time, she said, the group is looking into Arlington Terrace, the middle-income apartments in Mariners Harbor.

Mrs. Victor explained that the apartments' builder, Starrett Bros., had sought out the Volunteers and asked if they would consider locating in the apartment complex. The Metropolitan Placement Unit, which oversees such residences for the retarded, has encouraged the move.

The proposal will now be voted on by the Regional Retardation Council and must then go before Community Board 1, which has in the past approved a group residence for the retarded in New Brighton. "There is no intent to surprise the community board with this," Mrs. Victor said.

The board's chairman, Vincent Montalbano, was at yesterday's meeting.