

Willowbrook unit hits bureaucracy on placement delays

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The state unit which must place residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center into community facilities has pointed to a painstakingly slow bureaucracy as one of the major problems facing the Willowbrook placement effort.

In its first annual report to Gov. Carey, released today, the Metropolitan Placement Unit also said that placement goals agreed to by state officials in a federal court are not "readily attainable."

Officials of the state Department of Mental Hygiene said in March they would place 50 Willowbrook residents a month in community facilities. Beginning in October, the rate would increase to 75 a month and then to 100 a month beginning in April 1978.

Presently, the report says, the state is making 20 placements each month and is being slowed by a mass of city and state regulations. The report cited "overregulation" and "overdependency" on other government bureaucracies as major problems.

Despite its problems, the Metropolitan Placement Unit was able to point to first-year successes. They include:

¶ The placement of 247 persons, many profoundly retarded and severely handicapped, into a range of community facilities — almost double the previous year's total.

¶ Each former Willowbrook resident placed into the community also has a day-treatment program. The last audit by the Willowbrook Review Panel called the programs and placements "quality."

¶ Only one person placed in the community by MPU has been returned to a state developmental center.

¶ Ten group homes, including the first such facility for retarded children and the first facility for profoundly retarded persons, were opened in the city.

¶ The opening of borough developmental service offices in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The offices will be located in each borough and will be the focal point for services for the retarded — in and out of institutions.

One ironic success the MPU claimed in its report was cutting the time required for developing a community residence from 2½ years to less than one year. To many Willowbrook observers the time lag in setting up community facilities has been the most frustrating aspect in the implementation of the Willowbrook Consent Decree.

The decree was signed by Gov. Carey in April 1975. It called for the placement of 200 Willowbrook residents by April 1976 and, eventually, the phasing down of Willowbrook to 250 residents by 1981. There are 2,500 residents there now.

The state fell almost 70 placements short of its goal of 200 in April 1976 and, in part, the deficiency led to the development of the Metropolitan Placement Unit, which began work May 4. After its first year, the report stated, "the unit has still not begun to approach the level of performance" set forth in agreements made in federal court.

The MPU has worked toward the goal of 50 placements a month, "but this level of performance is not readily attainable," the report noted. To reach 50 a month, "problem areas" must be solved, the report added.

The problem areas include city and state bureaucracies which have not been responsive to MPU's needs, excessive and restrictive regulations and time-consuming multiple government approvals.

For example, the report said, it takes anywhere from three to 14 weeks to get a group home lease approved by the state; it takes eight to 10 weeks to get a rent or furniture purchase approved; it takes eight to 10 weeks for approval of a transportation contract for a person scheduled for the community.

The report said that "overregulation could be curtailed without any substantive lowering of certification standards" for placement in group homes. Some safety codes on proposed group homes "are so restrictive they defeat attempts at normalization," the report said.

Resistance by the community — evidenced on Staten Island two years ago

when the state attempted a group home in New Brighton — "has been and will continue to be a serious obstacle" to the placement effort, the report said.

It said that the sponsor of a proposed residence in Brooklyn received a death threat; that certain clients in Manhattan have been threatened; and that resistance "is pervasive and not restricted to middle-class areas."

The report said that Staten Island and the Bronx have been "doing relatively better" in placements than other boroughs. About 200 persons presently at Willowbrook are set to be placed into facilities on Staten Island.