

Review panel urges parents to challenge Willowbrook care

In a series of emotional speeches, a score of individuals from all over New York State told the Willowbrook Review Panel yesterday about the broken promises and bureaucratic delays preventing adequate care for their mentally retarded children.

Some expressed concern over the persistence of abuse and neglect at Willowbrook Developmental Center and other comparable state institutions; still others accused the Department of Mental Hygiene of "bad faith" and failure to provide the needed services in small group residences.

For the most part, the five panel members listening to their complaints were sympathetic, and promised to look into all of the charges.

They told the parents to continue to challenge the care being given to the retarded and handicapped in New York State, and in one case suggested that an individual take legal action against Gov. Carey.

Charged by a federal court with overseeing the requirements of the Willowbrook Consent Judgment of 1975, the panel recognized that compliance in many areas is still sadly lacking.

Dr. James Clements, chairman of the review panel, said in his opening remarks at the tri-annual open meeting in Manhattan that the latest audit of Willowbrook showed "some advances and some regressions."

"But the most basic requirements of the consent judgment — basic living requirements — are still no better than one year and seven months ago," he said.

Panel members, however, seemed

more optimistic about the community-based homes into which Willowbrook residents are not being transferred.

"We have found that the services by and large are good," Dr. Jennifer House, executive director of the panel, said, "and those persons being placed are improving at a rapid pace."

But speakers who came to the Warwick Hotel were more averse to seeing the brighter side.

Daniel Wallach, brother of actor Eli Wallach and a counselor at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, said that Brooklyn has 600 mentally retarded persons living at Willowbrook, who will eventually be switched to similar facilities.

Citing three cases where community opposition jeopardized the opening of group homes, Wallach concluded that "Brooklyn is not ready to say 'Come home, we want you' to its children and grown retarded people."

"We have to map out a plan to get community support," Wallach urged.

But panel member Murray Schneps, an attorney, got angry. "I don't buy it," he said. "The hell with the community. Stop asking for their permission. Say tough and make them learn by experience that they won't die when they walk next to a retarded person — they won't be raped and they won't get dirty."

Four speakers complained about court ordered number games, referring to a mandated number of persons being transferred from large institutions to group homes each month.

"They're putting people into hostels indiscriminately," charged an upstate woman about the Westchester Developmental Center.

"Do you know when?" a panel member quizzed. "How many? If you know, if you're certain it was an inappropriate placement, then your recourse is to sue. They can't move your child when there's a court case."

Felton King, first vice president of the Civil Service Employees Association, representing 55,000 state employees including those at Willowbrook, spoke of substandard working conditions at the Island developmental center and claimed Willowbrook treatment consists only of "custodialism."

"It's all counterproductive," King insisted, adding that the administration — involved in a "coverup" — is to blame.

"We agree with you," a review panel member said. "Our audit shows Willowbrook still does not have the staff the court has ordered. But it's hard to do anything about it."

— SYDNEY FREEDBERG