

Hearings to begin tomorrow on fate of Willowbrook patients

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Is the \$21.4-million Bronx Developmental Center an architect's dream but a people's nightmare?

That is the question that will be facing Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels tomorrow and Wednesday as he will hear testimony to decide whether hundreds of Bronx-born residents of the Willowbrook Developmental Center should be transferred to the spanking new 384-bed state center.

The Bronx center "is not for people," says Anthony Pinto, of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents' group which, along with others, is opposing the transfer attempt.

It will be up to the state's Department of Mental Hygiene to convince Judge Bartels otherwise in the next two days.

The Willowbrook Review Panel has made a formal recommendation to the judge that the unopened Bronx Developmental Center remain closed to all former and present residents of Willowbrook, the 2,500-bed Staten Island home for the retarded.

State officials have conceded that the modernistic four-story Bronx center, located in a heavily industrialized area of Westchester Heights near a hospital and a psychiatric center, is indeed not the best place for people to live.

The proposed move of Willowbrook residents, state officials contend, is only temporary and would end as soon as

community residences are developed in the Bronx.

The Review Panel fears that once Bronx center is opened it will become a "dead end." In a letter to the state commissioner for retardation, the panel says "it has no confidence that...harmful results...can be avoided" and "feels that the Bronx Developmental Center should not be used for any mentally retarded persons."

The Willowbrook Consumer Advisory Panel was even more adamant in a December report, saying that if the facility is opened "it must be accomplished with the conscious knowledge of the destructive effect it will have upon people for years to come."

The advisory panel called the new center "enormous, intimidating and suffocating, like being sealed in a giant stranded submarine." The center, the panel concluded, "is a masterfully and futuristically designed replication of every institution ever constructed to alienate, devalue and destroy people who have a difference."

The crux of the argument between the state and the parent-consumer groups seems to be this: The two-year-old Willowbrook Consent Decree called for normalization, a move away from institutions and the integrating of retarded persons into community life.

And yet here is the state attempting to open another institution, one the parents feel that is isolated from community resources and one that perpetu-

ates a non-normal life for the retarded. As one parent said: "It's like going from an old prison to a new one."

The advisory panel pointed out in its report: "There are no stores, parks, churches, libraries or other typical opportunities for normal social interactions in normal social settings."

What surrounds the center is the Bronx Psychiatric Center, Bronx Municipal Hospital, the Penn Central Railroad, industrial storage tanks and the Pelham and Hutchinson River Parkways.

The Review Panel has taken a moderate position on the opening of the center, between the state position of putting 344 residents there and the parents' position of keeping the center closed.

The panel at first proposed limiting the center's population to 96 Willowbrook residents and a total population of 144. Any Willowbrook resident would only be admitted for six months and then transferred to a community facility. The center's phase-out date for any Willowbrook resident would be 1981, the same time by which Willowbrook must reduce its population to 250.

The state rejected the panel's position, however, and the panel then said it had no choice but to ask that the Bronx Developmental Center not be opened at all...pending a decision by Judge Bartels, who will begin hearing all sides tomorrow in U.S. District Court, Brooklyn, at 9:30 a.m.