

Carey's mental hygiene shuffling faces uncertain fate

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ALBANY — Gov. Carey yesterday sent to an uncertain fate in the Legislature his long-awaited proposal to overhaul the \$1-billion Department of Mental Hygiene, the largest single agency in state government.

The reorganization program, promised by Carey in his State of the State message in January, would split the sprawling mental hygiene agency into three separate offices responsible for mental health, mental retardation and developmental disabilities and, finally, alcoholism and drug abuse.

Carey's plan would also commit the state to working toward the transfer of responsibility for mental hygiene service delivery to local governments and would permit local governments to establish their own comprehensive mental health programs to serve all mentally disabled persons.

"Obviously, enactment of this legislation will not resolve all of the problems which inhibit the more effective delivery of services to the mentally disabled," Carey said in a message sent to the Legislature along with a package of the nine bills designed to carry out the reorganization plan.

"I do not recommend this program to you with that expectation, and I ask your acceptance of it with the understanding that more will need to be done, both this year and in the future, both statutorily and administratively," the governor added.

Elements of the governor's program have been under discussion in recent months in a series of public hearings held by the Senate and Assembly Mental Health committees.

Assembly Committee Chairman Elizabeth A. Connelly of West Brighton, interviewed yesterday before flying to Rochester for today's final public hearing, said she expects Carey's program will be adopted by the Legislature before its anticipated adjournment within four to six weeks.

But Mrs. Connelly's Senate counterpart, State Sen. Frank Padavan, R-Queens, was less optimistic about the likelihood of the reorganization plan being adopted in full this year.

"We're talking about a very complicated proposal, and the total concept of moving to community-provided service is one we must be very sure about," Pa-

davan said. "I'd hate to see this legislation rushed through in the last few days of the session without proper understanding and discussion."

Under Carey's proposal, each of the three new mental hygiene offices would be independent and would be headed by its own commissioner.

The commissioners would be required to meet frequently in order to coordinate the activities of their respective offices, and they would have to work with a new Council for Mental Hygiene Planning in order to develop a five-year program for guiding the delivery of mental hygiene services.

According to the proposed legislation, the Willowbrook Developmental Center would be placed under the jurisdiction of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. The South Beach Psychiatric Center would be part of the Office for Mental Health.

A second bill in Carey's legislative package would provide for the gradual shifting of responsibility for providing mental hygiene services away from the state to local governments, with financial support from the state.

Yet another major element of the plan would provide for the creation of a new Commission on the Quality of Care, which would be directly responsible to the governor's office and would work with local boards of visitors to monitor the quality of services provided at individual institutions.

Certain aspects of Carey's plan have already come under fire from mental health care providers and consumers as well as from legislators in the course of the joint Senate-Assembly hearings.

Most of the objections have focused on the division of the mental hygiene agency itself, on the ground that many mentally disabled persons could not easily be assigned to one of the three divisions because they suffer from multiple disabilities.

Other critics have said the breakup would only add to the DMH's already thick levels of bureaucracy and that alcoholics should not be lumped together with narcotics addicts for treatment purposes.

Objections have also been raised by the state Civil Service Employees Association, which has a large number of the DMH's 60,000 employees among its membership. The union has expressed fears that a shifting of mental health care responsibility to local governments could jeopardize the quality of patient care available at state-run institutions and threaten the job security of DMH workers.

Several variations on Carey's reorganization proposal are already pending before the Senate after being cleared by Padavan's committee earlier this week.

One of the bills, sponsored by State Sen. William Conklin, R-Brooklyn, would split the DMH into two separate agencies responsible for mental retardation and developmental disabilities. The measure is similar to one that was approved by the Legislature in 1975 but was vetoed by Gov. Carey.

Another pending bill, sponsored by State Sen. Dale Volker, R-Buffalo, would divide the mental hygiene agency into four branches, with separate offices for the treatment of alcoholics and narcotics addicts.

Padavan said he decided to send the bills to the full Senate for consideration "so they get the proper airing as possible alternatives, to the governor's plan."