

Expert calls Willowbrook transfers 'absolute drawback'

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Dr. James D. Clements is 46 years old, reknowned for his knowledge about mental retardation, an expert witness at trials in 11 different states, a member of the President's Commission on Retardation and the director of a 400-bed institution for the retarded in Atlanta, Ga.

At 11:50 a.m. yesterday the tall, thin, red-haired doctor strode to the witness stand in the federal courthouse in Brooklyn.

What Judge John R. Bartels wanted to know was whether retarded residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center should be transferred to the spanking new \$21.4-million, 394-bed Bronx Developmental Center.

Softly but surely Dr. Clements answered the judge's query.

The Bronx Developmental Center is "the wrong concept at the wrong time in the wrong place," said Clements, who is also the chairman of the Willowbrook Review Panel. "The best place to learn is in the community."

Was Judge Bartels convinced by the four-hour testimony of Clements? There was no indication yesterday as Bartels deferred a decision which could block the movement of 96 Bronx-born retarded persons now living at Willowbrook. The judge said he might make a decision in the next few days.

The state Department of Mental Hygiene has sought to transfer the 96 persons as an intermediary step before placing them into community residences. Using the Bronx Center would speed the community placement effort, state officials contended in hearings yesterday and Tuesday.

The Willowbrook Review Panel, along with parent groups, have opposed the transfer, saying that movement to the Bronx Center would drain resources from the community, would slow the placement process and that the new center is not a good facility for retarded persons.

Judge Bartels, asking almost as many

questions as the attorneys for the opposing sides and showing a clear grasp of the involved issues being argued the past two days, posed three questions which went to the heart of the arguments:

¶ Why, he asked, can't the toilet training and self-feeding programs proposed for the Bronx center be accomplished at Willowbrook?

¶ If the Bronx center is used as an intermediary step, Bartels asked, wouldn't the state then logically seek to use other developmental centers as half-way points between institution and community?

¶ Finally, the judge said, why not just let the 96 residents in question stay at Willowbrook until community facilities have been readied in the Bronx? Dr. Clements, relating his experience in Georgia, told Bartels that using the Bronx center as an intermediary facility would make placement in the community "doubly difficult." He called it the creation of an "artificial situation," when a "real" situation already exists in the community.

Dr. Clements said that some years ago Georgia state officials shifted retarded persons from one institution to another closer to their homes. The move was to provide an intermediary step before community placement took place.

Dr. Clements said the result was that the community viewed the retarded person as too abnormal to go directly to a community residence and that the intermediary step called for an "enormous adjustment" for the retarded person and his family.

The intermediary step — as the Bronx center would be — would be an "absolute drawback?" Bartels asked.

"That is correct," Dr. Clements said.

Dr. Clements lashed into the use of institutions at all for treating the retarded. He called the institution a "holding action" and said that it takes "extraordinary management skill just to keep people from losing ground" in the institution.

As the case history of Willowbrook

has shown, the state's Mental Hygiene Department has never been known for its "extraordinary management skill."

On Tuesday Dr. Herbert Cohen, who would be the director of the Bronx center when it opens in September, and Thomas A. Coughlin, state commissioner for retardation, both said the center would accelerate the community placement process.

Seemingly Judge Bartels has three options: He can allow the mass transfer to take place as scheduled; he can block it altogether; or he can allow it to take place but put time limits on the length of stay for the ex-Willowbrook residents in the Bronx Center.

"It's just a question," Bartels said, "of a conflict of opinions of experts."