

Marchi would restrict violent patient releases

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — New restrictions on the ability of the state Department of Mental Hygiene to release patients from mental institutions would be imposed under legislation proposed yesterday by State Sen. John J. Marchi of Ward Hill.

Marchi, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he will also seek \$200,000 in the state's supplemental budget to develop a 15-bed "secure ward" at the South Beach Psychiatric Center so that violence-prone mental patients can be housed at the special facility.

The Republican legislator said he was taking the actions in response to an April 3 incident in which, police say, a 19-year-old Willowbrook Developmental Center patient on a community release program beat and raped a 7-year-old girl near Silver Lake.

Marchi had asked DMH Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb to impose a moratorium on patient releases in the wake of the incident, but Kolb — in a letter made public by the senator yesterday — said he would not do so.

Kolb has, however, ordered developmental and psychiatric center officials to evaluate patients with a history of violent behavior in the same manner as

they would evaluate a patient with a criminal background before release.

Kolb said such evaluations would be "more stringent than those given non-assaultive" patients.

Marchi's bill to toughen standards for patient releases would require that all discharges be approved by the DMH commissioner after thorough reviews. The commissioner would have to develop rules and regulations for such reviews and would be required to certify that any patient approved for discharge "may be so discharged or releases without endangering the public safety."

Kolb, in a three-page letter to Marchi, requested that steps be taken to establish special facilities to house "aggressive and violently inclined" patients.

Marchi, in response, said he would seek \$200,000 in the supplemental budget to set up a special ward at South Beach "for severely agitated or suicidal patients...to adequately protect them, the staff and the community."

"No society can call itself civilized if it does not provide the best possible care for the mentally ill and the mentally retarded," Marchi said. "But society has a right and a duty to protect the weak and defenseless from the kind of tragedy that occurred April 3 on Staten Island."