

Federal official says apology owed to Willowbrook parents

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

A federal official, conceding that a \$2.6-million Willowbrook Developmental Center research project is a failure, called yesterday for a public apology to the parents of 59 retarded people who were promised, and never saw, improvement under the special program.

Gates L. Plumb, chief of demonstration grants for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which initiated and funded 75 per cent of the goal-oriented project, said that "clearly some public explanation should be given on why the program messed up so at Willowbrook."

Although it is hard, he said, to pinpoint blame for the series of administrative blunders and "incompetence" that marred the program during its two-and-a-half-year course, "it is apparent we all expected too much and a lot of people were let down."

Under the plan, the potentials of 59 pre-selected Willowbrook residents, said to be hidden under the warehouse concept of institutionalization, were to flower with the aid of a regimented program of testing, record-keeping, training and treatment made possible by the \$2.6-million grant.

A team of specialists was to judge each individual's abilities, listing the areas where help was needed. Then, the rehabilitation plan was to be spelled out that included timetables and milestones for reaching goals in personal hygiene, vocational skills and self care.

The contract, signed in September 1974, was given to the Information Services Division of the Rockland Research Institute, whose scientists were to have supervised the work in Building 29 at Willowbrook — the base for the system's testing.

But the goal-oriented system, Plumb admitted yesterday, was never "really implemented at all."

At the start, the project was viewed as the best alternative to the misery

that became synonymous with Willowbrook of the early '70s.

"But we really made a mistake in putting the program there," Plumb insisted, adding that the "changes" at Willowbrook — in staffing as well as philosophy — contributed substantially to the program's lack of success.

Plumb said an HEW decision on its share of future funding for the project will come next week.

Approximately \$400,000 of the original grant is unspent, "but we're not even sure we want to give that," Plumb said.

A spokesman for the state Department of Mental Hygiene said yesterday the state agency will continue to pay for the research even if the federal government vetoes future aid.

But the work, the state spokesman said, will be conducted at Wassaic Developmental Center, an upstate institution, not at Willowbrook.

"The atmosphere there is just not conducive to the testing of the clinical system," the spokesman said.

Reacting to the officials' statements, Anthony Pinto of Bulls Head, long active in the Willowbrook reform movement, said "apologies are not enough."

"There was a commitment," he said, "made to the parents and it should be fulfilled."

Pinto charged that the mental hygiene agency was opposed to the program's success because "if they were made to raise the level of staffing there, they would have had to do it" throughout the developmental center.

He said a parent organization will ask the Willowbrook Review Panel, the board overseeing conditions at the institution, to look into the matter.

"The hardware's in place here so they should continue the project here," Pinto insisted, adding it's just another example of "bad faith" and broken promises preventing adequate care for mentally retarded and severely disabled people.