

Workers remain in dark over future of Willowbrook

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

"Lady Rumor" and low morale prevail these days at the Willowbrook Developmental Center, where hundreds of workers are claiming they've been completely cut off from the details of a fated, court-mandated contract that affects their future.

Approximately 700 employes there of all grades, for whom civil service status traditionally has meant job security, fear what will happen when the newly hired staff of a private organization reports to work at Willowbrook July 15, taking their jobs and control over at least five of the institution's buildings.

"A veil of secrecy enshrouds the ma-

chinations of the state," a petition signed by 334 of the affected workers says. "No one has bothered to extend the simple courtesy of discussing the changes with us."

Responding to the charge in a telephone interview yesterday, Thomas A. Coughlin, deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene, said that Willowbrook workers who will be transferred as a result of the state United Cerebral Palsy Association takeover will be given two weeks' notice, as state law presumes.

"It would be unreasonable to assume you can keep everyone at Willowbrook informed of everything that's going on," Coughlin said, adding: "Very frankly,

this whole proposal was not our idea in the first place."

Under a March 10 ruling in Brooklyn Federal Court, the mental hygiene agency agreed to relinquish its role in the care of approximately 600 mentally retarded and physically handicapped persons at Willowbrook.

The agreement, giving the private organization the "authority to hire full staff" in the UCP-run buildings, was designed to avoid a contempt trial against three state officials, including Coughlin, for failure to implement provisions of the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree.

Coughlin, while admitting the impend-

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ing deal between the state and the UCP "perhaps could have been made a lot clearer" to the employes, said he does not expect any layoffs at Willowbrook this fiscal year.

But, he added, as the institution's population, now at 2,400, is reduced, "obviously there won't be a need for the same number of workers."

"We gave every employe at Willowbrook the opportunity to apply for jobs at UCP," Coughlin said. "Other than that, we cannot tell them anything until a contract is signed."

But the workers, culling information from "somewhat reliable sources," were angry when they learned a tentative deal in fact had been reached, providing for the turnover of the so-called baby's complex — five facilities that are the nucleus of Willowbrook's future — to the palsy group.

In addition, the accord calls for Buildings 15 and 17, housing multiple handicapped young men and women, to be run mutually by UCP and the state.

In their petition, the non-professional and professional workers of the baby's complex say: "We are being told that we are incapable of delivering requisite

services; however, our records indicate the contrary."

"The tacit implication that UCP, as ostensibly established professionals, can bring about radical, positive changes makes us wonder why the state...does not turn over to UCP a unit bereft of programming, in need of administrative change, or one that would provide a true test of UCP's ability to alter the course of mental retardation health care delivery," the petition adds.

Jerry Gavin, a spokesman for the court-appointed Willowbrook Review Panel, which oversees conditions at the developmental center, said the panel agrees that the state "may have chosen the wrong buildings."

"Clearly," Gavin said, "we have some questions about the way the whole thing was handled. The employes have been left in the dark. All we're hoping for is that the services are going to get better."

Meanwhile, as the state and UCP haggle over last-minute changes to an agreement both want signed by Friday, the union representing Willowbrook workers is proceeding with a court case — trying to stop the turnover, which appears at this point inevitable.