

Palsy group eyes July 15 takeover

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Another promise — one of a long list contained in the state's court agreement to improve the lives of the mentally retarded at Willowbrook — was technically broken yesterday.

But this time, a spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene said, "only the finer points" stand in the way of compliance and the reaching of an accord with a private group for operation of seven buildings at the developmental center.

The department spokesman, Robert Spoor, vowed an agreement would be reached with the state United Cerebral Palsy Associations by July 15 — only two weeks and a day after yesterday's court-mandated deadline.

Such an eventuality — could be seen as a major victory for frustrated parents of Willowbrook residents, who are still battling and prodding Gov. Carey and other state officials into fulfilling commitments of the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree.

Robert Schonhorn, executive director of the palsy group, said only "minor questions must be answered" before his non-profit organization takes control over the selected Willowbrook facilities, accomplishing the March pledge made to parents in Brooklyn Federal Court.

But first, Schonhorn said, UCP wants "detailed assurances" from the mental hygiene agency proving not one of approximately 600 institutional workers would lose his job as a result of the transfer of responsibilities to the private group.

"I'm concerned about that," Schonhorn admitted, adding that even though the state has given its word that the employees' jobs are secure until April, he wants a plan outlining where each is to be reassigned.

Under the court agreement allowing the takeover, the palsy group has complete authority to hire professional and non-professional staff for the UCP-run buildings, chosen mutually by the state and the private organization.

These facilities, according to Spoor and Schonhorn, are final. Four of the five buildings constituting the so-called baby's unit — housing mentally retarded children — will be run exclusively by UCP.

In addition, the palsy group will hire professional staff for three other facilities — Building 12 of the baby's unit and Buildings 13 and 15, composed of multiple handicapped adolescents — with the mental hygiene agency providing state-paid therapy aides.

All told, Schonhorn said, 641 residents will be affected in the takeover which, it is hoped, will result in improved care for them.

The union representing state workers at the 384-acre institution — the Civil Service Employees Association — has been upset by the plan. Through litigation, the union is still trying to fight it, though most experts familiar with Willowbrook say they'd be stunned if the takeover does not take place July 15.