

State loosens grip on Willowbrook tomorrow

By SYDNEY FREDBERG

State officials are expected to surrender sovereignty tomorrow over a portion of Willowbrook Developmental Center, giving a private organization a shot at wiping away the misery that seems to persist there under public control.

The unprecedented arrangement, providing for the transfer of care and treatment of 641 retarded residents to the private staff of United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York, becomes official at 9 a.m., when approximately 700 UCP-hired workers are to prepare for new job roles in seven center buildings.

But the transition, like the four months of contract negotiations that preceded it, will doubtless be far from

smooth.

For tomorrow's planned takeover, seen as a remedy to some of the problems that plague any institution Willowbrook's size, will mean the dislodging of approximately 700 state workers, many of whom have been assigned to the affected buildings for years.

Spokesmen for Willowbrook and the state Department of Mental Hygiene, the institution's operating agency, said yesterday that attendants, therapists and professionals affected in the takeover have been given new job assignments in other Willowbrook facilities, to which they are expected to report Saturday.

But the workers, upset over a deal they say has left their future as civil servants in jeopardy, have vowed to

give the private group trouble despite the state's word that no one will be laid off at Willowbrook for the next two years.

In a last ditch effort to get the state to renege, Felton King, president of Willowbrook's local of the Civil Service Employees Association, is leading several busloads of institutional workers to Albany today to protest an agreement they say was made under a veil of secrecy.

If the demonstration proves fruitless, King said, "We will have to resort to other measures."

Although King declined to reveal just what those measures might be, the union leader said last week that 90 per cent of the center's 4,500 employees were poised to lock UCP out of the buildings.

No matter what happens tomorrow, King declared, Willowbrook workers will continue their legal challenge to the arrangement "because the private group is not qualified to take over the care of retarded people."

It was in May that the union's attorneys filed a skillfully worded lawsuit in the state court system. The suit downplayed the issue of jobs and civil service status, while bringing to the fore some sticky constitutional questions, namely: Under existing state law, is it constitutional for New York State to contract out governmental functions to private groups?

But even so, the underlying issue remains jobs. Under a federal court order of 1975, the state is required to reduce Willowbrook's population, now at 2,400,

to 250 by 1981. As more institutionalized persons are moved to community group settings, state officials admit, fewer employes will be needed.

The union's complicated suit is as yet unsettled, but state and UCP leaders have decided to proceed anyway with a plan first sought by parents in March as a way to improve conditions for the retarded of Willowbrook.

State officials finally agreed to it, saying they, too, hoped that by bringing Willowbrook down to a more manageable size, care for all of the residents at the troubled institution would get better.

The arrangement between UCP and the mental hygiene agency calls for the state to relinquish complete operational authority over four of five buildings which constitute the baby unit.

In addition, three facilities — Building 12, 13 and 15 will be subject to shared staffing arrangement, with UCP responsible for the supervisors and the state for clinical staff.

Robert Schonhorn, UCP's executive

director, said yesterday the 641 affected residents are mostly young, many of them incapable of eating by themselves and most not even toilet trained.

Schonhorn explained that the first six months of UCP operation will be partially devoted to a massive cleanup.

There will be intensive efforts, according to Schonhorn, to escalate the level of programming each resident receives, with schedules revamped to meet each individual's need. Additionally, Schonhorn added, the medication regimens of the 641 residents will be reevaluated at once.

Schonhorn, who has yet to name a director for the UCP-run Willowbrook complex, said his newly hired staff has been asked to report to work tomorrow at 9 a.m. for two days of orientation.

On Saturday, he said, they will take over operation of the selected buildings, working in concert with Willowbrook workers for five days. Then, on Thursday, state staff is to report to new assignments, Schonhorn explained.

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Reassignment to begin for affected workers

A spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene said information would be released today concerning the redeployment of state workers following a planned takeover of seven Willowbrook Developmental Center buildings by the United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York.

But the spokesman maintained that the estimated 700 employes affected in the takeover all had been reassigned — some to other buildings where staffing had been at a deficit, others to a new "pool," created to replace absent workers or employes on leave.

She added that a contingency plan would be put into effect if unhappy workers make good on a threat to lock UCP out of the buildings it intends to take over.

"We're hoping this arrangement will be good for everyone," the spokesman concluded, adding that the hope is "care will improve all around."

Under the takeover, the private palsy group and its executives are to become accountable to the federal court, and like Gov. Carey, various Department of Mental Hygiene and Willowbrook officials, UCP will be named a defendant in an ongoing lawsuit, which was brought to improve conditions at the 384-acre institution.