

# 200 Willowbrook employes face possibility of losing jobs

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

A deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene revealed yesterday that as many as 200 state workers at the Willowbrook Developmental Center stand to lose their jobs within the next year and a half.

In a concession that the unionized employes said added fuel to their strike threat, Thomas A. Coughlin, the commissioner, admitted layoffs at the institution for the retarded are "bound to occur" as Willowbrook decreases its population.

Although it is impossible, Coughlin said, to disclose an exact timetable for the firings, he indicated that the state might begin to lay off civil servants this year, and that the reductions in Willowbrook's work force will continue to in-

crease with time.

Saying he wanted to "clear up" earlier statements in which he vowed there would be no layoffs as a result of the United Cerebral Palsy Association takeover of a portion of Willowbrook, Coughlin maintained the workers instead will lose their jobs because of a court-mandated plan to reduce the number of Willowbrook residents.

Under the plan, the institution has until 1981 to get the population, now at 2,400 residents, down to 250 by discharging patients to smaller community facilities.

Care for 640 of those residents has already been transferred to UCP.

"In 1975," according to Coughlin, "we projected there would be 1,500 residents at Willowbrook by March 31, 1978.

That's what the spending plan budgets for."

He added that with the phasedown of patient load, there will be a commensurate reduction in staff, with 1,130 of the institution's 4,300 workers lost by March 31, 1978.

"We'd like the whole thing to take care of itself by attrition," Coughlin said, "but there's a very good possibility that won't happen.

"They (the union) kept pressing me for a number," insisted Coughlin, following a meeting over the takeover dispute in Brooklyn Federal Court. "People kept asking me when and how many and when you get in front of a federal

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court, you have to give them a number."

While the Albany commissioner denied he was contradicting past statements involving layoffs, or that he had misled any of the concerned parties, the leader of the union representing Willowbrook workers charged Coughlin had lied.

"I'm upset and I'm angry," Felton King, president of Willowbrook's Civil Service Employees Association, said. "They told us there wouldn't be layoffs. We didn't believe them, but we didn't think they'd come out and tell the judge that."

Coughlin and other state officials have consistently claimed throughout the past six months that "no layoffs will result at Willowbrook within the next two fiscal years as a result of the UCP takeover."

Yesterday's revelation by mental hygiene officials concerning contemplated job reductions at Willowbrook was made during a three-hour meeting called by Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels, who approved the idea of a UCP takeover of seven buildings March 11.

But Bartels failed to mediate the seemingly insurmountable dispute between management and labor, with indications that the closed-door session only served to exacerbate the differences.

When representatives of UCP, the state, the parents and the union emerged from the meeting, the parties reported no progress.

In fact, according to informed sources, it was more than the union that viewed Coughlin's disclosure as a "bombshell."

Asked why parent and UCP representatives were surprised by the outlining of a layoff scheme, Coughlin responded:

"There is nothing in our agreement with UCP that indicates there will be no layoffs. (Executive director of UCP Robert) Schonhorn knows that and I don't know why he'd be surprised."

For two months before an agreement with the private group had been concluded, Schonhorn said he had sought and pressed for assurances from Coughlin that no layoffs would result from the private group's presence at Willowbrook.

An attorney for the parents of the institutionalized retarded, who requested the takeover as a way to improve patient care at Willowbrook, was said to be similarly surprised by the prospect of job loss this year.

"He gets surprised at a lot of things," Coughlin said, referring to the attorney.

King indicated Bartels would not be averse to seeking recourse if a job action were called at Willowbrook.

Strikes by public workers are prohibited under the state Taylor Law, which King said he is not afraid to break.

"There won't be a strike Wednesday or Thursday, but I'm not going to broadcast my plans in advance," King said.

An estimated 700 of the institution's 4,300 workers are directly affected by the UCP takeover, with 600 of those facing job reassignment to 24 still publicly operated buildings, the state says.

But the jobs of Willowbrook workers have actually been threatened since April 1975, when the Willowbrook Consent Decree ordered the massive reduction of the institutionalized population.

King said his membership would take some solace in knowing that the state is planning to retrain employes to work in community facilities where Willowbrook's retarded residents are being placed.

But Coughlin, while insisting "no one likes to see layoffs," said there will clearly be a need for fewer workers, and that a state law preventing the transfer of state workers from one public institution to another "makes our job even tougher."

By 1981, Coughlin maintained, all but 400 or 500 civil servants will be employed at the 364-acre institution for the retarded.