

Mental hygiene executive prefers private care for retarded daughter

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

The director of 18 state institutions for the retarded, including Willowbrook Developmental Center, has removed his 16-year-old daughter from one of the state-run facilities and placed her in a private program on Staten Island.

Thomas A. Coughlin, a deputy commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene, said yesterday his decision to transfer his child, Tracy, to the United Cerebral Palsy Association's Nina Eaton Center was based on the belief that "no state developmental center could offer the quality of specialized care my daughter needs as UCP."

A multiple handicapped child, Tracy had lived in publicly operated institutions for 13 of her years, most recently at the 414-bed Sunmount Developmental

Center in Tupper Lake, N.Y.

When a place became available at the 50-bed South Beach facility in May, Coughlin said, Robert Schonhorn, executive director of UCP, "suggested that if I wanted to bring Tracy down, I could."

A team of UCP therapists went to the Tupper Lake facility to ensure that Tracy would benefit from Nina Eaton's intensive programs. Since it was determined that her neurological disfunctions were precisely the types of problems in which UCP treatment excelled, the young woman was shifted there for an indefinite stay, according to Coughlin.

Coughlin explained that his daughter is not unlike many other Sunmount residents who have been transferred to different places to receive individualized therapy.

Tracy will return to the institution,

nearer her family's Albany home, he said, when the UCP staff deems her condition improved and her potential reached.

The Nina Eaton Center is generally regarded as the model institutional setting for developmentally disabled people in New York. It was opened in 1975, when 50 of Willowbrook's most disabled residents arrived there for new, desperately needed programs. There are few facilities like it in the state.

Many of the center's residents have gained skills most doubted they would, and as a partial result of the success, UCP also has begun to operate seven of Willowbrook's 31 buildings with 640 patients.

Schonhorn said yesterday it is the pol-

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icy of the Nina Eaton Center, located in Building D of the South Beach Psychiatric Center, "to admit people on the basis of need, not on the basis of whose daughter they are."

He denied special treatment was granted to Coughlin's daughter, calling the publication of a story revealing Tracy was at the center "capitalization on someone's severe disabilities."

Coughlin pointed out that the UCP takeover of the Willowbrook buildings could have had nothing to do with his decision to place his daughter in the Nina Eaton Center, since the state-to-private turnover was a court-invoked remedy asked for by the parents of Willowbrook's retarded residents.

He explained he got into the business of providing services for the retarded more than 16 years ago when his daughter was born.

"I have attempted ever since to separate my duty as a parent from my duty as an administrator, and that's some-

times very hard," Coughlin said.

Coughlin added that smaller, private institutional settings are the wave of the future in the treatment of profoundly disabled persons like Tracy.

"There is no doubt the primary differences between the Willowbrooks and the Nina Eaton Centers are the size," Coughlin said, while adding his goal as commissioner remains to fight for "spe-

cialized services for every person in New York who needs them."

He also noted that Tracy, who had severe behavioral problems just four months ago, has improved markedly in the short time she has been at Nina Eaton. "I don't know if she'll ever walk," the commissioner said, "but the types of improvements I see already are important to me as a father."