

While union balks, UCP cites gains at Willowbrook

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Although the union representing state workers is still reeling over it, officials at Willowbrook Developmental Center and United Cerebral Palsy Association say their one-month-old venture into the joint running of an institution has already borne positive results.

For state officials, the takeover of seven center buildings by UCP has afforded a reduction in Willowbrook's size, leaving more time, they say, to concentrate on the development of new

programs for the 1,700 retarded residents still under public care.

In addition, according to Willowbrook administrators, an estimated 300 state employees have been transferred from UCP-run to 24 publicly operated buildings, correcting staffing deficits and resulting in enriched activity plans for those people in need.

And for UCP, the private organization that has been the object of so much union acrimony and public attention, the progress has come in the form of visible improvements for many of the 625 chil-

dren and adolescents it began to treat just one month ago.

But despite the apparent gains on both state and private fronts, the controversy over the Department of Mental Hygiene's arrangement with UCP continues.

Leaders of Willowbrook's union of public workers, the Civil Service Employees Association maintain the fight against private operation of a portion of Willowbrook is "just beginning," although they say the tactics have shifted

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from strike threats to an "all-out media war."

CSEA delegates from an estimated 300 locals statewide convened to discuss the Willowbrook situation in Kiamasha Lake, N.Y., last week, and allocated \$25,000 to draw public attention to what is happening at Willowbrook and what is happening with the Department of Mental Hygiene's whole campaign on deinstitutionalization," CSEA spokesman Roger Cole said.

"We're going to be advertising in newspapers, on radio and in major communities around state facilities to enlighten New York citizens on this continuing out business across the state," Cole added.

And the Willowbrook local, using its own funds, has also hired an investigative research team in an attempt to uncover black marks or questionable practices in UCP's past, according to Felton King, president of Willowbrook's chapter of the CSEA.

"All because, King says, the private takeover — a remedy first proposed by parents to solve Willowbrook's lingering woes and then agreed to by a federal court — will eventually lead to a loss of job, for hundreds of state workers.

And while union attempts to "expose" UCP go on, so does the legal wrangling that began five months ago when the CSEA challenged the takeover in a law suit.

A federal and state court have yet to rule on the validity of the state-to-UCP transfer, which the union is claiming not only violates existing collective bargaining agreements but the New York C constitution as well.

A decision in the Albany court case is expected within two weeks, but a loss by either side is likely to mean an immediate appeal.

Roger Cole, a spokesman for the statewide CSEA, representing an estimated 143,000 workers, says: "At this point it looks like the route (of challenging the takeover) is through the courts, but the local down there (at Willowbrook) has received our support for whatever action they deem necessary."

And Elin M. Howe, Willowbrook's acting director, continues to insist, meanwhile, that no layoffs will result from the takeover. But as Willowbrook decreases its population to meet a court-mandated limit of 250 Staten Island residents by 1981, she warns, the institution's work force, now 4,000 strong, will begin to shrink.

But although the future of some civil servants remains cloudy amid the deinstitutionalization attempt, for now, at least, things seem to be going rather smoothly at Willowbrook.

Ms. Howe says the state gains have come primarily in the enrichment of educational and recreational programs, with more residents deriving the benefits of these services.

And the long-awaited UCP programs are beginning to take shape in the seven privately operated buildings, as the emphasis is shifting to the "interdisciplinary team approach" in the treatment of multiple handicapped people, in which a therapist, for instance, can perform the tasks of workers in a number of fields.

According to Meredith Harris, UCP's associate director of programming, some of the improvements can be measured in inches, others in feet. For some, it comes when a child smiles for the first time or when a resident no longer recoils at the thought or act of touching.

Ms. Harris, maintaining that the greatest difference between UCP and state care is the quality of the staff, says, "No matter how well meaning (some of the state workers) were, in a lot of cases we found chronically ill people.

"Kids with severe respiratory problems, cardiac conditions, children whose muscles weren't functioning because they hadn't been positioned or taken out of cripple carts in years."

"We inherited all of this," Ms. Harris says, explaining that state staff often did not receive training for proper treatment of developmentally disabled people.

Ms. Harris says that structured programs are being and-tailored to meet each resident's need. The activities, for now, she admits, are necessarily on the most basic level, with positioning, feeding and toileting skills being taught to children who in most cases suffer from a variety of developmental ailments.

"Some of these children we're talking about were never, never in any programs before," says Linda Lubart, the program director of the new "40-41 center," located in the big glass bubble that is the heart of the UCP-run baby complex.

This program, Ms. Lubart says, is the private group's version of school, just as Willowbrook has an education center for residents under state care.

Ninety-seven of the higher functioning children participate in the six-hour-a-day classes, with the emphasis on learning how to live in the community, where, it is hoped, all of the residents will go.

But Ms. Harris, while saying the "ideal situation would be to have every one of our (625) kids ready for a group home by 1981," admits UCP cannot promise it will meet the placement timetable mandated by the court.

"Whether or not they'll all be in the community (living in group or foster homes) by 1981, I cannot tell you," she says. "It depends entirely on the types of programs the community has. But we're certainly not going to place them out there," she continues, "if the services are inferior to what we can offer here."

And Willowbrook's director Howe agrees to some extent, saying that for the state's part the community placement of residents under public care will depend on how many agencies develop group homes and how many localities are willing to welcome the retarded.

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