

Placement director for retarded named to top welfare post

Barbara Blum, director of the Metropolitan Placement Unit, the agency mandated to oversee the depopulation of Willowbrook Developmental Center, was nominated yesterday to head the state Department of Social Services by Gov. Hugh Carey.

Mrs. Blum, 47, a veteran of city welfare and mental hygiene agencies, will have the top job of any woman appointed by Carey, and will be responsible for one of the state's most important agencies.

She succeeds acting Commissioner Carmen Shang, who has filled the post since Philip Toia left it to become state budget director.

From 1971 to 1973, Mrs. Blum headed the city's social services division for child welfare and was responsible for adoption, foster care and preventive child care. She then headed the metropolitan office of the state Board of Social Welfare.

Since then, Mrs. Blum has run the Metropolitan Placement Unit of the state Mental Hygiene Department. The placement unit is under a court order to reduce the population of Willowbrook to 250 by 1981.

Mrs. Blum said she looks forward to her new job because it offers her the opportunity for attacking the social problem of the family, which she said "has been terribly weakened in the last decade."

"I think the family unit desperately needs to be strengthened," she said in a telephone interview from her Manhattan office.

She described herself as a "good manager," a point she wants to make "because I'm a woman" and some people might think a woman would be all services and no cost control.

As for costs, she said it is often worthwhile to spend lots of money "up front," on education for the handicapped, or on adoption services, because the long-range return in income taxes from working handicapped persons or lower foster care costs, is so great.

"I used to just have a fit, when I working at the city social services department, that they were willing to spend \$5,000 or \$10,000 for foster care but wouldn't pay for adoption services," she said. The same complaint has often been made by welfare workers in up-state counties.

Mrs. Blum indicated that she agrees with Carey on Medicaid funding for abortions, although the subject did not come up during her job interview with the governor. Carey has repeatedly said that abortions should be available to poor persons so long as they are available to rich persons. The federal government has severely restricted Medicaid payments for abortions, leaving the state and local governments to pick up the full cost of most operations.