

# Fifth Ave. hospital may get ex-Willowbrook patients

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Flower Fifth Ave. Hospital in Manhattan, financially troubled for years, has been targeted for conversion into a private institution for 160 former Willowbrook Developmental Center residents.

The facility could turn out to be the most specialized and most expensive for the retarded in New York State, with health officials estimating the annual cost of maintaining a resident as three times that of public institutions such as Willowbrook. Willowbrook is said to cost about \$27,000 a year per resident.

Under a plan state officials hope to take effect April 1, the multi-handicapped residents would be transferred from the structurally unsound Gouverneur unit of Manhattan Developmental Center which, in turn, would be shut down.

The proposal, advanced by a component of New York Medical College, could mark the beginning of the end for the 400-bed Flower Fifth Ave. Hospital as an acute-care facility.

Although New York Medical College, which administers the hospital, is only contemplating the conversion of three floors into a facility for the retarded, negotiations are reportedly under way to merge Flower Fifth with neighboring Metropolitan Hospital.

A source privy to the discussions on merger said that the Gouverneur proposal would "help push the movement toward consolidation with Metropolitan" — a facility administered by the city Health and Hospitals Corp. that retains an affiliation with New York Medical College.

Officials of the college's Mental Retardation Institute (MRI), refused to answer questions about the status of the program, calling it only a "feasibility study."

But Sister Mary Paul, a consultant for the state Metropolitan Placement Unit, as well as other mental hygiene officials, said the MRI proposal only awaits approval by the state Health Department over Medicaid reimbursement rates before it begins actual operation.

The state has not signed a contract with MRI, Sister Mary Paul said, although she said "an agreement should be reached soon so that the residents could be moved by April 1."

A spokesman for the Health Department, Barbara Thomas, said that MRI-Flower Fifth is asking the state to classify the proposed retardation residence as a "rehabilitative hospital," thus qualifying it for triple the Medicaid rate received by institutions like Willowbrook.

"Flower Fifth has already submitted one budget which was rejected because it was not detailed enough," Ms. Thomas explained, adding that rates will be computed when additional budget material is submitted.

Under the MRI plan, the Gouverneur residents, whom the state admits have been neglected since their transfer from Willowbrook 14 years ago, would be offered a series of specialized services, ranging from diagnostic work-up to education and therapy, Sister Mary Paul said.

While three floors of Flower Fifth would be occupied by MRI services, the remainder of the hospital would retain its acute-care status "for awhile, at least," she explained.

"These residents are the most handicapped imaginable," Sister Mary Paul said. "And I don't think it's fair to compare the (Medicaid) rates with other developmental centers. They need intensive services to get them ready for community living."

She added that MRI has a commitment to find community residences for the 160 institutionalized persons by 1981, a deadline for such placement under a federal court decree.

"This program would be unique and essential," according to Sister Mary Paul. "No services can be offered at Gouverneur because of space limitation... And if anything were to happen in that building (on Water St.), there would be a holocaust."

Despite state approval of the program, the Flower Fifth arrangement is being criticized by Manhattan community groups and by the union representing about 400 state workers at Gouverneur whose members claim that hospital officials have refused them details of the proposal.

In addition, the CSEA's Gouverneur chapter apparently sees a situation unfolding not unlike that which occurred when the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New York gained operational control over seven buildings at Willow-

brook.

"We're going to be stabbed in the back, just like the people at Willowbrook, local president Edward Gagnon said. "Workers are going to lose their jobs right and left."

Sister Mary Paul, meanwhile, conceded that if the Gouverneur residents are moved, some state workers could be laid off. "But we want to work with the union," she maintained, "so that does not happen."

In addition, health care personnel employed in the affected buildings at Flower Fifth apparently stand to be redeployed under the MRI set-up.

New York Medical College's MRI currently operates a center for the retarded in Valhalla, N.Y. Residents, however, generally remain for short stays, receiving diagnostic work-up and treatment on an outpatient basis.

The Flower Fifth proposal calls for the patients to remain in the institutionalized setting until they are ready to enter the community, state officials said. When residents leave, according to Sister Mary Paul, their places could be taken by "others in New York State who need the services."

A spokesman for the Willowbrook Review Panel, asked about the possibility of eventually moving Willowbrook residents to a Flower Fifth facility, said "there is no way the review panel would go along with that."

The court-appointed panel, the spokesman added, has decided to go along with the Flower Fifth idea, mainly because Gouverneur is in such poor physical condition.

"But (Flower Fifth) is still an institution," he said, adding that the review panel's preference is for retarded persons to live in smaller community residences, where they are capable of more growth.