

State boss puts big 'if' on Willowbrook layoffs; union vows Albany fight

By BRUCE ALPERT

The acting state commissioner for mental retardation yesterday vowed that there would be no layoffs at the Willowbrook Developmental Center provided the state Legislature approves a new centralized hiring procedure.

Acting Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin said that if the hiring authority were transferred from the directors of facilities for the retarded and insane to the central office of the Department of Mental Hygiene, jobs can be found in New York City facilities for all workers displaced at Willowbrook.

Under Gov. Carey's proposed 1978 budget, Willowbrook's staff is to be reduced from 4,100 to 2,006 by March 31, 1979. The reduction in staff coincides, Coughlin said, with a planned reduction in Willowbrook's population — now estimated at 1,650 — to 1,100 by that date.

"I can say unequivocally that there

would be no need for layoffs if the hiring procedures are changed," Coughlin said. But he conceded that the proposal has run into opposition from a number of groups, including the directors of mental hygiene facilities who don't want to give up their hiring authority, and may face a rough going in the Legislature.

Coughlin said he could not guarantee what would happen if the legislation is not passed, saying that he is still hopeful that much of the staff reduction at Willowbrook can be accomplished by attrition.

But Felton King, president of the union representing Willowbrook's 4,100 employees, predicted that massive layoffs were unavoidable under the Carey budget proposal and said that the union would wage a battle in the Legis-

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lature to change it.

"I predict that massive layoffs will begin in September," said King, president of the Willowbrook Chapter of the Civil Service Employees Association. "And you can bet we're going to fight this politically in Albany and make sure the institution's state employees by March 1979.

King said that union members were incensed that the state recently transferred care of 640 residents at seven buildings at Willowbrook to the United Cerebral Palsy Association when it is contemplating the elimination of half of idents into ill-equipped community facilities.

King also charged that the budget projection, calling for a population at Willowbrook of 1,100 by March 1979, could not be achieved without "dumping" residents into ill-equipped community facilities.

But Elin Howe, who was named director of Willowbrook Thursday after serving as acting director since September, said that if sound facilities could not be found for any of the 550 residents scheduled to be transferred between now and March 1979, they will remain at Willowbrook. And she predicted that the institution's budget, reduced in the governor's proposal from \$49 million last year to \$40.7 million, would be adjusted accordingly.

"The budget is just for planning purposes," Ms. Howe said. "I'm sure if some of these planned reductions in population don't occur, we would not be forced to live under the planned funding situation."

The projection reductions in the institution's population contained in the governor's budget are consistent with a 1975 court decree requiring that the institution's population, once estimated at over 6,000, be reduced to 250 in 1981, Ms. Howe said.