

Bill may avert possible layoffs at Willowbrook

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly has introduced a bill giving the state Department of Mental Hygiene the authority to hire personnel at state institutions, legislation that state officials say is needed to avert layoffs at the Willowbrook Developmental Center.

But the president of the union representing Willowbrook's 4,000 employees, who the state claimed will benefit from the legislation, said yesterday he will fight the proposal.

It would concentrate too much power with acting Commissioner of Mental Retardation Thomas A. Coughlin, Civil Services Employees President Felton King said. "He would be able to transfer people all over the state if he wanted to and that's too much power."

Connelly said she believes safeguards can be added to any centralized hiring procedures to prevent the type of abuses feared by the union.

"My interest in pushing for the legislation is the need to protect the jobs of the Willowbrook workers," said the South Shore Democrat. "And we're told that this would eliminate the need for layoffs."

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, state officials said, with a planned reduction in Willowbrook's population — now estimated at 1,650 — to 1,100 by that date.

Many of those excessed Willowbrook workers will be unable to find positions at other state facilities in the city unless her legislation is passed, Mrs. Connelly said. Hiring of employees is currently left to the directors of state facilities and they haven't shown much of an interest in hiring Willowbrook workers, she said.

Meanwhile, the assemblywoman released a report outlining the accomplishments of the Assembly Standing Committee on Mental Health, which she chairs.

Among the measures which the committee pushed through the legislature, Mrs. Connelly said, was legislation extending the state's commitment to provide 100 percent financial assistance for services to chronically disabled persons who are discharged from state-run institutions and a bill allowing Medicaid reimbursement for day treatment programs.

"A major responsibility of the committee for the 1978 legislative session will be to monitor the reorganization of the Department of Mental Hygiene,"

Mrs. Connelly said. The reorganization divided the state agency into three separate divisions, including one for mental retardation.