

Willowbrook name change gets backing

By TERENCE J. KIVLAN

ALBANY — What's in a name? A lot, according to Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, especially with regard to Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Mrs. Connelly is sponsoring a bill to change the name of the institution for the retarded to the Staten Island Developmental Center. A change of identity is needed to complete the reforms at the center that were set into motion by the landmark federal court decision three years ago, she argues.

The name Willowbrook, she says, has become almost a national byword for the kind of chamber of horrors that the center became in the early 1960s when nearly 6,000 residents, many of them rejected and abandoned by their families, overwhelmed its wards.

When people hear the word Willowbrook, she explains, they think of bitter court battles, human medical experiments and gruesome television footage of residents languishing in filthy rooms — like the inmates of an 18th-century lunatic asylum.

Willowbrook still has problems, Mrs. Connelly contends; but conditions have improved. And if they are to continue to improve, she says, the center must have a new image not only to boost the morale at the center but also to attract a more dedicated and better qualified staff.

Naturally, Mrs. Connelly's proposal has drawn snickers in Albany. Some cynics say that the renam-



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ing of Willowbrook to polish its image would be the equivalent of changing Alcatraz to Golden Gate Gardens in the hope the public will forget Al Capone once lived there.

Other critics argue that the Connolly bill will just create more unnecessary expenses for the state. What about all the signs and stationary and the regulations that presently mention the Willowbrook name? these critics ask.

The bill, which passed the Assembly two weeks ago, does have its supporters, however. State Sen. John J. Marchi, a very sober and practical man, said this week he will back the measure when it arrives in his house.

Officials of the Department of Mental Hygiene, meanwhile, see nothing ridiculous in Mrs. Connelly's proposal. The expense involved in the change would be so minuscule as to be inconsequential, they say. In the case of the stationary and the regulations, they explain, the changes would be made as supplies run out and when revisions have to be made.

As the officials also point out, the change may soon be especially appropriate because, as of 1981, Willowbrook is scheduled to become a 250-bed community facility serving only Staten Island. No longer will it be a statewide institution. It will be the Staten Island Developmental Center.

More-over, at least to some observers, Mrs. Connelly's argument about image does have merit. Recalling the nightmare that Willowbrook once was, it would be difficult indeed to imagine any humane institution bearing that name.