

Willowbrook grant provides for worker retraining plan

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Willowbrook Developmental Center, where the potential for loss of jobs remains highest of any state institution, has been awarded a state training grant to prepare 300 state employees for work in community residences.

The training program, to be run jointly by instructors from the College of Staten Island and Willowbrook itself, will enable some of the state workers to move, along with the institution's residents, to community facilities for the mentally retarded as called for under a court decree.

The union representing approximately 3,500 Willowbrook employees as well as the institution's administrators had been seeking about \$6,000 in state funds as a way to avoid possible layoffs as residents are moved into small community facilities, including group homes and foster-care settings.

The court decree calls for the institution's patient population, now estimated at 1,600, to be reduced to 250 by May 1981. In addition, state officials hope to release approximately 7,500 of the 20,000 residents now in other developmental centers within the next five years.

Willowbrook's retraining program, provided by a grant from the state Department of Education, is the first to be appropriated for any of the 20 state-run facilities for the mentally retarded.

Under the training program, which Elin M. Howe, Willowbrook's director, said would begin next Monday, approximately 300 workers will receive 20 weeks of training by CSI and Willowbrook instructors.

According to Felton King, president of Willowbrook's Civil Service Employees Association, the workers will be chosen by a joint union and administration task force, with the instruction taking place on the center's grounds.

Then, as positions become available in community residences, employees will apply for those jobs, be they in the public or the private sector.

In announcing approval of the grant, Thomas A. Coughlin, Gov. Carey's designee to head the new Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said that the funds demonstrate New York's commitment to its staff as well as its clients.

"I will spare no effort to ensure that employees of my office are not subjected to mass layoff," Coughlin said in a

statement prepared for delivery to a State Senate committee tomorrow.

But King, while saying the training program is "a start in the right direction," renewed a charge that the state has not proved commitment to the idea of having state employees operate the community-based facilities.

"If they were," King said, "they could tap millions of dollars in federal funds that are available for retraining staff on a statewide basis. That's what we're pushing for now."

For about a year, a controversy has been raging between the state Department of Mental Hygiene and its employee union over the state's depopulation effort and over who should operate a variety of community services for the re-

tarded — state employees or private agency staff.

The dispute began when the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New York took over a portion of Willowbrook, displacing about 600 workers from jobs some had held for years.

King said that "state workers are best equipped to work with the retarded residents of this institution," and that those "who have been doing the job all these years should be given the opportunity to continue their efforts."

Mental hygiene officials, however, pledge that by 1981, only 400 or 500 civil servants will be employed at the 382-acre institution, with the remainder lost through attrition, movement to new positions or layoff.