

Albany mental health panel hears charges of 'dumping'

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Advance Staff Writer

ALBANY — Representatives of parent groups for the handicapped and the union for institutional workers told a State Senate panel yesterday that the state's "repatriation" effort could lead to widespread dumping of the mentally retarded.

Thomas A. Coughlin, Gov. Carey's designee to head the new Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, denied the charge, saying state officials have "not and will not dump clients into communities" ill-prepared to deal with them.

Coughlin was testifying before the Senate Mental Health and Addiction Control Committee's hearing on his confirmation.

A deputy commissioner in the Department of Mental Hygiene for two and one-half years, Coughlin conceded under questioning that it would be "sheer folly and utter nonsense" for him to say that of 700 people discharged from state institutions during the past two years, all "are receiving the same level of service they got in their developmental center."

But a review of those placements, he added, indicates that less than 6 percent had to return to institutions because of lack of support services, compared to 39 percent in previous years. "And it is apparent we are on the right track," said Coughlin, once the director of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Despite concern over what one parent called the "headstrong rush for deinstitutionalization," Coughlin, a 40-year-old former state trooper, was hailed almost uniformly as a sensitive and compassionate consumer.

That is not "to imply that the men who preceded Mr. Coughlin were unfeeling," explained Frances W. Reville, a member of the board of visitors of an upstate institution and the parent of a retarded child.

"They were fine and dedicated doctors," she added, "but because they were schooled in the field of mental illness, they could not truly relate to the problems of the mentally retarded."

But Coughlin's confirmation was opposed by the Civil Service Employees Association, which represents 3,600 Willowbrook workers.

Dr. James Cohen, CSEA consultant,

noting that 8,000 of the 20,000 residents in developmental centers are to be discharged within five years, called Coughlin's policies an attempt "To change a system at the expense of clients, existing staff and the community."

He said that by transferring institutionalized residents to smaller, community-based facilities, the state was handing over care to costly private agencies. "It is a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul," Cohen said.

One state worker from the Craig Developmental Center in Sonyea, N.Y., claimed that Coughlin's office recently had discharged more than 60 severely retarded residents to a private nursing home, where they were receiving limited, if any, service.

And the parent of a severely retarded boy told committee members of his trials in gaining services for his son.

Richard Jones, the parent, said the state had determined his boy needed 10 days of inpatient programs at the Monroe Developmental Center, but later was denied the services because of "all the other people who were going back to the institution after they couldn't make it."

"I finally made enough noise about it, and he got the 10 days," Cohen explained, adding, however, that his demand was met at the expense of other parents "who didn't scream and didn't holler."

Joseph T. Weingold, executive director of the New York State Association for Retarded Children, an organization that sparked the state program of deinstitutionalization, gave only a luke warm endorsement of Coughlin. He asked:

"Are we going to say that a family care home, where a man is tied to a chair and beaten with a lead pipe is the least restrictive environment in relation to the institution from which he came?"

"Or, are we going to determine this on the basis of the needs of the person and try to make wherever he should be, in or out of the institution, the best and least restrictive environment?"

In 1972, Weingold spearheaded a court drive for change at Willowbrook. A consent decree asked for by the parents of Willowbrook residents was signed in 1975, calling for the dismantling of the institution by transferring residents into small, community facilities.

Only 250 persons are scheduled to be in Willowbrook come 1981, with massive reductions anticipated in state staff. But now Weingold is asking for a moratorium on the community placement programs, until the state can "adequately plan" backup services for the repatriated citizens.

Indeed, Coughlin, during yesterday's hearing, maintained his goal as commissioner of the new office, which was established last year under a reorganization act signed by the governor, would be to get the state out of the direct-care business.

Under questioning by Sen. Frank Padavan, the Queens Republican who chairs the mental health panel, Coughlin agreed that quotas set for Willowbrook and elsewhere were merely benchmarks, "not hard and fast numbers."

And because the public has "fears and concerns" about the deinstitutionalization program, Coughlin said, he recently asked the federal court in Brooklyn, which oversees conditions at Willowbrook, to slow down the placements — from 100 residents to 50 a month.

Other witnesses at yesterday's hearing decried unequal system of refunding services for disabled people who live in the community as opposed to those in the state-run centers. Coughlin, answering the critics, said he would work to equalize the funding formulas so each group is reimbursed similar amounts by the state.

Padavan said his committee would call Coughlin for further questioning early next week, when a vote would be taken on the confirmation. Then the recommendation goes to the Senate Finance Committee, chaired by State Sen. John Marchi, which in turn will pass its position on to the Senate.