

Carey signs name-change to erase center stain

Because state officials feel it is difficult to imagine any humane place bearing the name of the Willowbrook Developmental Center, the institution's name will be changed April 1 to the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Gov. Carey announced yesterday he has signed the change-of-name bill in an attempt to polish the center's image and to erase a word that has become a catch-all for the chamber of horrors the center became in the early '60s.

The change of name, according to Elin M. Howe, the center's director, is "signaling" a new era because as of 1981, the institution for the retarded is scheduled to become a 250-bed community facility serving only Staten Island.

"I think it's a positive step in some ways," Ms. Howe explained, "because it will at least help to eliminate in the public's mind the stigma," carried over since the institution housed more than 6,000 people.

The sponsors of the legislation, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly and State Sen. John Marchi, say they realize, of course, that some of the problems remain. But conditions at the 382-acre institution have improved enough to warrant a "fresh start," they maintain.

"Dedicated parents and staff, residents, as well as the Staten Island population need a lift in morale," a memo from Mrs. Connelly released yesterday said. "It is essential that as a new direction is followed, progress not be impeded by the constant stigma of Willowbrook."

As for expense, the state Department of Mental Hygiene contends there will be little. All those signs, stationery and court regulations mentioning the word Willowbrook will be changed as supplies run out and revisions have to be made.

—SYDNEY FREEDBERG