

Ex-Willowbrook boss in top job

By TERENCE J. KIVLAN
Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — The Senate yesterday unanimously approved the nomination of Thomas A. Coughlin, the former acting director of Staten Island Developmental Center, as the head of all the state's institutions for the retarded.

The Senate confirmed Coughlin as the first commissioner of the Office for the Mentally Retarded and Developmental Disabilities, one of the three agencies created by the reorganization of the sprawling Department of Mental Hygiene passed by the Legislature two years ago.

Coughlin, a former state police trooper who has a mentally retarded daughter, has served as deputy commissioner within the department since late 1975. He was the acting director of the troubled Island center for six months beginning in March 1976.

The nomination of the new commissioner was regarded as somewhat controversial because he is one of the main supporters of the state's policy of phasing out most of the big institutions, including the Island facility, by transferring the majority of their residents to community facilities, such as foster homes, half-way houses and hostels.

Parent groups and civic associations charged that the placement program amounted to "dumping" the residents in various communities without providing adequate funding for facilities. Coughlin was also attacked by the state civil service union because the program called for the elimination of jobs at the institutions.

One part of the program provided for the the transfer of more than 400 residents and the elimination of about 1,000

jobs at the Island developmental center by July 1979. The union put considerable pressure on State Sen. John J. Marchi, who as finance chairman had the power to kill Coughlin's nomination.

Marchi said yesterday that he had always been impressed by Coughlin's credentials but "wasn't pleased by the way he bottom lined the situation" at the center.

The Finance Committee hearings were put off until after the Legislature passed the budget, which contained an extra \$4 million to prevent any job

losses at the Island center. The additional appropriations were inserted by Marchi after negotiations with Gov. Carey and Democratic leaders in the Capitol.

Coughlin's critics also included Republican Sen. Frank Padavan of Queens, the chairman of the Senate Mental Health Committee, who held a public hearing on the community placement plan last month. But Padavan eventually endorsed the nomination after Carey agreed to add another several million to the budget to soften the impact of the placement program in other parts of the state.