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Mental health officials challenge audit

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Responding to an audit from State Comptroller Arthur Levitt, Office of Mental Health officials yesterday said they had already developed plans to use excess space at South Beach Psychiatric Center and three other new institutions.

The officials said the space has been reserved for patients transferred from older psychiatric centers and for outpatient clinics to take care of released mental patients.

The officials also said arrangements

had been made to use the more than \$1 million in beds and other equipment stored at the centers. They explained that legal "technicalities" arising from the federal purchasing contract had prevented the reassignment of the items to other facilities.

The Facilities Housing Corp., which carries out agreements with the federal Housing Finance Agency, has finally allowed the state to sell the excess equipment provided the proceeds go to reduce HFA's bonded indebtedness, the officials explained.

The audit revealed that the depart-

ment grossly overbuilt South Beach and the other new centers, located in Albany, Syracuse and Elmira, because planners ignored the trend toward a de-emphasis on institutional care and a declining population of resident mental patients.

At South Beach alone, the audit said, only 63 percent of the bed space was occupied by mental patients and \$257,000 worth of equipment was sitting idle in storage areas.

South Beach officials challenged the audit's results, contending that the value of the stored beds and other equip-

ment amounted to only \$120,000 and that much of the excess space had already been turned over to private agencies for outpatient clinics.

In its response, the Office of Mental Health conceded that the shift away from the big institutions to small community facilities far outstripped the pace of the construction program from 1964 to 1974.

But they also said Levitt's audit was based on outdated information that did not take into account efforts to make use of the excess space and equipment generated by the building plan.