

\$100 million spent to improve Willowbrook

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A series of federal court orders directing a reversal of "inhumane and shocking" conditions at Willowbrook State School has cost state taxpayers in excess of \$100 million, an Advance study of state records reveals.

Approximately three-quarters of the court-related costs have gone to improve care for 5,241 mentally retarded persons then living at Willowbrook, the study indicates. Much of the remainder has been spent on administration and setup of an intricate maze of agencies charged with overseeing the institution's workings or implementing the terms of the so-called Willowbrook Consent Judgment of 1975.

The complex system today consists of a state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, a state Metropolitan Placement Unit, a state Borough Developmental Services Office, a Willowbrook Review Panel, a Technical Assistance Unit, a Professional Advisory Board, a Consumer Advisory Board, and perhaps a dozen additional advisory boards, units and panels on the grounds of the 382-acre campus.

Not one of those agencies existed three years ago.

In addition to the \$100 million spent because of the court orders, since 1975 New York State has allocated approximately \$160 million for the budget of Willowbrook, now called the Staten Island Developmental Center. Federal aid to the institution for special projects, some of them court related, has totaled about \$50 million since the signing of the decree.

"I can't argue with your figures,"

Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin said when told of the court-related costs. "We knew it was going to be expensive because to go back and undo all that was wrong at Willowbrook for 25 years — to change a system in place that long — is costly indeed."

The state comptroller's office has not attempted a comprehensive financial audit of the Island institution since 1973, spokesman Ronald Tarwater said. Nevertheless, Coughlin maintained that only a "negligible percentage" of the funds has been lost through waste, theft or inefficiency, as in "any large organization," he said.

Parent groups representing the mentally retarded residents sued the state in 1972 to stop abuse and neglect at Willowbrook, where people languished on overcrowded, filthy ward floors.

In 1975, without admission of guilt, Gov. Carey and top aides consented to sweeping changes at Willowbrook that eventually will leave their mark on all publicly run institutions. Steps to which Gov. Carey agreed included improved staffing levels, new programs, an end to human experimentation and, essentially, a new, humanitarian approach to the treatment of the retarded.

At the heart of the order was a state promise to dismantle the giant developmental center by 1981 by transferring all but 250 native Staten Islanders to small, community facilities where the retarded are deemed capable of more growth.

Approximately 2,200 residents remain at Willowbrook today, about 580 of whom are under the care of the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New York State. Former Willowbrook residents

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