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Willowbrook panel cost is zooming

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ALBANY — The cost of the Willowbrook Review Panel — the watchdog unit set up to ensure state compliance with the 1975 consent decree — has mushroomed to more than \$300,000 a year.

Top officials of the state Office of Retardation and Developmental Disability, whom the panel once served with contempt papers, are careful not to challenge the need of the independent agency. But when asked about its budget, they make clucking noises about the expense of maintaining the panel, especially its seven consultants, who are paid \$200 a day plus travel expenses.

"I go to all of the panel's meetings and I don't get the \$200," says Thomas A. Coughlin, commissioner of retardation. "I guess this is what happens when you lose in court."

Panel members, however, point out that their compensation rate is quite low compared to the \$100-an-hour fees that the department has paid lawyers from private law firms to represent the agency in legal actions brought by the panel to enforce adherence to the consent decree.

Moreover, the members contend, the spending levels of the panel have been directly proportional to the state's cooperation in carrying out the federal court order, which requires mental hygiene officials to phase out the former Willowbrook Developmental Center down to a 250-bed community facility by 1981.

"If the state kept its nose to the grindstone, it wouldn't have to spend anything on us," insists Murray Schneps, the most active panel member. "But

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