

Marchi, Connelly blast federal role in Willowbrook

By TERENCE J. KIVLAN
and SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Two Staten Island legislators yesterday blamed Willowbrook State School's bureaucratic nightmare and fiscal confusion on federal court intervention into the state institution's affairs.

State Sen. John J. Marchi blasted "mischief" and "ineffective programming" that have resulted from a 1975 court decree directing a reversal of subhuman conditions at Willowbrook, now known as the Staten Island Developmental Center.

"The courts dump their wisdom on us," charged Marchi, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, "and then they are non-factors in carrying (the court-mandated terms) out."

"Reforming conditions (at Willowbrook), everyone agrees with that," the senator added, but he said that the Brooklyn Federal Court, which monitors the 332-acre institution, is usurping "legislative prerogatives" by its continued involvement in the case.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, who chairs the Assembly Mental Health Committee, said her panel is attempting to "get a handle on" millions of state dollars poured into Willowbrook to meet the terms of the 1975 court order.

"But when you say that," the North Shore Democrat said, "people say, 'You have no heart. You don't care about the retarded.'"

"The court shouldn't have gotten involved," Mrs. Connelly said, conceding her position has shifted somewhat since 1975 when she had "mixed emotions" about federal intervention.

"In hindsight, I see that some terrible precedents have been set. The Legislature, I think, is on the horns of a dilemma," she said.

The legislators' comments were made in response to a story in the Sunday Ad-

vance stating that an investigation showed the state has spent at least \$100 million to implement terms of the so-called Willowbrook Consent Judgment of 1975.

The Advance story quoted Thomas A. Coughlin, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, as saying that court-related costs conceivably could be more than \$100 million.

But the state does not know the exact figures, Coughlin conceded, because no one has been keeping track of the court order's expense to taxpayers.

Marchi, calling the state's movement in and out of court on the matter "horsefeeding," said his staff will look into the finances of Willowbrook, which has not undergone a comprehensive fiscal audit since 1973.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Gov. Carey, who signed the court document in 1975, said a copy of the Advance story has been forwarded to the Budget Division for study.

"They intend to look at it," said the spokesman, Howard Clark, "to see if there's any waste there."

In the Sunday story, Coughlin maintained that only a "negligible percentage" of funds to the institution has been lost through waste, theft or inefficiency.

The Advance investigation, however, showed that as much as \$25 million may have gone not to resident care, but to the setup of an intricate maze of agencies charged with overseeing the institution's workings or implementing the terms of the court order.

In addition to the \$100 million spent because of the precedent-setting court order, since 1975 New York State has allocated approximately \$160 million for Willowbrook's budget.

Federal aid to the institution for special projects, some of them court-related, has totaled about \$50 million since the signing of the decree.

At the heart of the order was a state promise to dismantle the giant developmental center, which once packed away more than 5,000 people, by transferring all but 250 native Staten Islanders to small, community facilities by 1981.

Approximately 2,200 residents remain at Willowbrook today, living under what are generally regarded as drastically improved conditions. Institutional care, however, still is criticized by some groups.

Willowbrook residents "repatriated" into community-based facilities are deriving the greatest benefits of the court order, monitors have said. But state officials — as seen in the case of a New Brighton group home — have moved slowly in this area.

A story in the Advance Monday outlined the saga of the New Brighton facility, which the state "hopes" will open this summer. Because of bureaucratic bungling and community resistance, it has taken four years and \$134,000 to attain this "hopeful" beginning for eight retarded people.

Coughlin, in the Sunday story, indicated that if he had it his way, some of the court-related program wouldn't have been funded. "But the judge didn't agree with me," he said.

New York State will spend whatever it takes to put an end to institutional horrors, but disapproves of funneling money into bloated bureaucracies and duplicate services, Coughlin added.

The Willowbrook suit, brought in 1972 by parent groups representing the institution's residents, continues to be heard in Brooklyn Federal Court before U.S. District Judge John R. Bartels.

Bartels, who said in the past he cares only about the plight of the retarded and what's best for them, could not be reached yesterday to comment on the Marchi and Connelly statements.