

Community resistance stalling plans by officials to distribute retarded

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Organized community resistance to the mentally retarded is stymieing state plans to dismantle the giant Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

According to a state report released yesterday, New Yorkers, who once cried out for an end to the Willowbrook horrors, now are fearful of disabled people sharing a block with them.

Staten Island and other parts of the city "have responded to the proposed placement of retarded persons (into communities) with fear and hostility," the state report maintains. "Organized efforts to thwart placement are becoming commonplace."

Although no examples were listed, mental hygiene officials privately cited the extreme cases of neighborhood arsonists believed responsible for setting fire to proposed facilities for the retarded in Dongan Hills and Greenlawn, L.I.

Widespread misconception about the mentally retarded is the "leading rea-

son" the state effort to return all but 250 profoundly handicapped center residents to their hometowns by 1981 is threatened, the report, prepared by the Metropolitan Placement Unit, concludes.

The state, under court order to meet the deadline, concedes it is well behind the imposed timetable of 75 placements a month and has asked the Brooklyn Federal Court to slow the deinstitutionalization program.

Community resistance, generally vocal but peaceful, was one of a myriad of complications encountered by state staff trying to place retarded persons in least-restrictive living environments.

The report, which outlines MPU's second year of operations, asserts that other problems resulted from parents objecting to the transfers and from the not-for-profit agencies' inability to generate enough proposals for establishing residences.

In addition, according to the MPU report, snags in the placement process oc-

curred because residents remaining at Willowbrook — approximately 2,200 of them — are those with more severe handicaps and thus more difficult to place.

Despite the delays and problems, MPU officials say in the report that 1977 was marked by a generally speeded-up transfer process, with 435 persons repatriated, double the number of the previous year. Thirty-four of the residents were returned to the Staten Island community, most of them to family-care settings.

Approximately 30 group homes were opened in the city in the past year, compared with 10 such homes in 1976, the report states.

On Staten Island, a Volunteers of America home in Mariners Harbor began serving 12 retarded people, and a 20-bed United Cerebral Palsy facility in St. George is expected to be fully operational by the summer.

Both Island homes had been in the

planning stages for years, and, according to the MPU report, were forced to delay start-up because neighborhood residents opposed the sites.

Other developmental center residents were transferred in 1977 to scattered Island apartments, each housing two handicapped persons and a caseworker under a program operated by the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New York State.

All told, the MPU report states, the Island had the fewer number of community placements this year, "as might be predicted from its relative population size."

From 1972 to 1975, however, when the state pushed a "mass exodus" to empty Willowbrook's overcrowded wards, about 200 center residents, many of them not originally from the Island, came to live here because of their acceptance by charitable Island families. Since 1975, the formal beginning of the "community placement" program, MPU has approved transfer of about 50 center residents to various sites on the Island.

And as to the future: MPU predicts that more and more formerly institu-

tionalized persons will need a variety of special services, including closely supervised programs for the more severely handicapped.

The metropolitan unit, established by court order in 1975, found that about 5 percent of those transferred to the community were forced back into institutions because of inability to "make it" in their neighborhoods. But that percentage, officials pointed out, is negligible when compared to the 50 percent return rate of mentally ill patients to state hospitals.

Retarded citizens are not discharged from institutions, the report noted, until they are assured proper day programs and medical services accompanying new living situations.

Finally, MPU recommended that New York State engage in a "massive media campaign" to counter public acrimony about the retarded and endorsed legislation that would ensure the rights of the mentally retarded "to live in appropriate community settings."