

## **Review panel costs not soaring**

To say the least, it is disconcerting to read in a front page headline "Willowbrook panel cost is zooming," and then discover that the subsequent article reports a decrease in panel expenses this year. The article in any case is filled with inaccuracies.

The members of the Review Panel, who were nominated according to specifications in the consent judgment and appointed by the court, receive travel expenses and an honorarium of \$200 per day, out of which they pay their own living expenses. When meeting in New York City, even with a state rate their hotel rooms cost \$40 a day. This is not out of line with what the state pays expert consultants, which includes travel and living expenses and up to \$150 a day.

To prepare for their monthly meetings, the members of the panel must review extensive correspondence, proposals from the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and its several facilities, and numerous reports from its staff on its auditing and other activities. Panel members also conduct certain negotiations with OMRDD and other state and private agencies and make visits to institutional and community sites where members of the Willowbrook Class live and receive programming. Further, they are present at still somewhat frequent hearings in the Federal District Court.

Mr. Coughlin is correct when he concedes that the greatest increase in the panel's budget came when its staff was enlarged in April 1977. However, the added staff members were not the result of a court order, but of a negotiated agreement between the then Division of Retardation and the panel. Further, contrary to the Advance article, the panel staff is not composed of civil service employees and mental hygiene officials. Staff members were chosen by the executive director, with concurrence by the panel, for their skills and experience in relation to the panel's operations.

The hiring of additional staff resulted in less need for the use of consultants and the reduction in consultant fees reported. Additionally, the panel's budget was \$300,000 last fiscal year, and remained the same for this current fiscal year.

The panel did not and cannot, as an arm of the court, "attempt to have the court hold...state officials in contempt." The motion for contempt was made by the plaintiffs in the Willowbrook case.

The Advance, over the past few weeks, has published a series of articles which seem to imply a lack of good faith on the part of OMR/DD and others who are attempting to make the benefits of the consent judgment a reality for members of the Willowbrook Class. The impact of these articles, it appears to us, is negative and, therefore, it is disappointing to read them in a newspaper which, in the past, has done so much to assist in alleviating the deprivation suffered by residents at Willowbrook.

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