

State chief says community must accept retarded

By ROBERT MIRALDI
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If they make a Hollywood movie about the life of Thomas A. Coughlin, the 40-year-old commissioner of the state's office of mental retardation, 1978 might be the turning point of the film. The scenario could go like this:

A sandy-haired, blue-eyed Irish kid grows up in Brooklyn, moves to upstate New York, where he marries, becomes a state trooper, and fathers three children, one of whom is multiply handicapped and retarded.

The father reluctantly puts his child in a state institution and becomes infuriated, first at the poor care she receives at the hands of the state and, second, at the complete lack of services in his hometown community.

Like a one-man wonder, Coughlin goes out and develops those services himself and, in the process, so impresses the governor that he gets appointed commissioner in charge of 18 centers for 27,000 retarded persons. The governor tells Coughlin to repeat his miracle: Set up small homes and develop services in towns all over New York State.

And that's where the movie, and Coughlin, would be today.

"It's probably the most difficult problem we face," Coughlin told the Ad-



Thomas A. Coughlin

vance editorial board last week. "We've made a major turnabout in that system, but things have begun to slow up now."

For Thomas Coughlin, for his boss, Gov. Carey, and for the residents of the state's developmental centers, now is

(Continued on Page 2)

Page 1
of
2 Pages

State chief cites need of retarded to be part of community



Thomas Coughlin during his interview with the Advance Editorial Board.

(From Page 1)

the turning point:

Can New York State deal with the conflicting pressures of unions, parents, advocates, the courts, and the voters, and still depopulate state centers?

Coughlin clearly thinks so and feels he has a handle on those problems. In a wide-ranging interview with the Advance, Coughlin pictured himself as the man in the middle, trying to get an important job done while still meeting the needs of the various groups he must appease.

About the various groups he must deal with, Coughlin, a former director at Willowbrook State School, said:

Counts: "When we run into numbers mandated by a court...well, that's a very difficult situation," Coughlin said, referring to the 75 retarded persons a month the state has told a federal court in Brooklyn it will place in small community-based facilities.

Nevertheless, Coughlin said, the state expects to place 1,300 persons this year into community facilities, with 600 going into New York City's neighborhoods.

Unions: "The unions are not against community placement; their concern is union membership," Coughlin said. What the state's civil service union, representing 60,000 workers, fears, he said, is that union members will lose jobs as the centers reduce their populations. **Will those staffers be retrained to follow persons into the community?**

"It's about to happen," Coughlin said, pledging to retrain "the good staff people who should be able to work in the community."

Parrents: Coughlin, responding to a question, said he was aware that increasing numbers of parents are fearful of what will happen to their retarded children when they are placed in the community and he conceded that there will always be a need for some type of institution for certain retarded persons.

Coughlin added, however, that philosophically he feels that "we don't need institutions." Pragmatically, he said, "that might not happen for another 25 years."

Voters: Although Coughlin has said in the past that care for the retarded is not a political issue, he is aware that 1978 is an election year and that his boss, Carey, is running for re-election.

Coughlin said the state could place 100 persons a month into community-based facilities, meeting court-imposed levels, but that would "cause quite a stir" in neighborhoods that have been reluctant to accept retarded persons.

Group homes for the retarded, Coughlin said, "will continue to be the major thrust" of the effort to depopulate state centers. But that process will not be rushed, communities will be informed and the necessary approvals will be sought from appropriate agencies, Coughlin said.

"The days of sneaking into communities are over," Coughlin said. He recalled that when he established group homes in Watertown, N.Y., in 1969, the homes were "set up at midnight." But, he added, "those days are gone."

Coughlin said he feels much of the apprehension and fear in communities about retarded persons is "just a matter of education...a matter of telling people about retarded persons." Coughlin then listed "what they don't know," referring to the community's lack of knowledge about the retarded.

Coughlin said he feels that any community residence or treatment program operated by an agency of any type should be approved by a community before it is started. But he vetoed the idea of community boards approving foster care situations, where, for example, a family takes one or two retarded persons into their home.

Other Bureaucracies: Many observers have blamed the slow process of placing retarded persons in the community on mismanagement and red tape in state bureaucracies. Coughlin agreed that red tape is a major problem, and pointed to a group home on Tysen Street in New Brighton as a "classic example of state bureaucracy."

That group home for 10 persons was purchased in 1974 and, despite \$134,000 in taxpayer money, the home is still not open. Coughlin singled out the state Office of General Services as one of the slowest of bureaucracies. "I have to work something out with them," he said.

Another problem bureaucracy, Coughlin said, has been the Facilities Development Corp., which handles much of the construction and architectural work for the state. FDC was to inspect a group home in Brooklyn that was being named after Gov. Carey's late wife, Helen, and the governor wanted to dedicate the home in August.

Coughlin said he told FDC to have the work finished in time for a September dedication, but FDC told him it wasn't on its schedule of work. With a smile, Coughlin said: "I told them that if it wasn't put on their schedule there would be some new schedulmakers."

Money: Although the state is spending massive amounts of money to fix up state centers and move residents into the community, Coughlin conceded that persons who were never institutionalized and still live in the community are being shortchanged. Counties have to pay 50 percent of the cost for their care, he said, with the state paying the other half.

"There are no more county tax dollars" for programs for the retarded," Coughlin said, adding that he favors a formula under which the state would pay 90 percent of the cost and the county or city 10 percent. Such a change would cost the state \$60 million.

Page
2
of
2
Pages