

UCP may lose control of 3 Willowbrook buildings

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Three of seven buildings at the Staten Island Developmental Center, operated by a private organization for a year, may revert to state control because of widespread dissatisfaction over the way the living units are run.

State officials confirmed yesterday that excessive worker absenteeism, lethargy and a lack of leadership plaguing a portion of the United Cerebral Palsy Association complex at the Willowbrook institution are resulting in "inappropriate service" to approximately 200 mentally retarded persons.

The three buildings — staffed by UCP-hired supervisors and state-hired thera-

py aides under a so-called shared-staff agreement — are among seven turned over to the private group last September in an effort to improve conditions at the massive state institution.

In a letter to Willowbrook's union leader, state Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin wrote, "I agree wholeheartedly that the shared-staff arrangements with UCP have not been working as we would wish."

Coughlin indicated in the letter he would seek approval to revert the buildings to "100 percent state control" from Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels. Bartels, in February 1977, agreed to the UCP takeover despite the objections of the center's state employee union.

Under the court order, the private group gained complete authority over four buildings and shared-staff arrangements in three, while the remainder of Willowbrook living units, housing 1,500 people, continued to be operated by state employees.

"In order to ensure appropriate services, I have agreed to return Buildings 12, 13 and 15 to 100 percent state control," Coughlin wrote Felton King, Willowbrook's union president.

"As we discussed at our meeting today (last Friday), this process will probably take until Oct. 15 to complete," the letter stated.

Coughlin, a former director of the Sta-

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ten Island institution, could not be reached yesterday to comment on the plan, which reportedly would not affect UCP's exclusive dominion over the four buildings housing 400 residents.

But a spokesman for Coughlin, Cora Hoffman, confirmed that the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities wants to take charge of the shared-staff living units. She cited as reasons "low morale and the high level of tension" and "the mistake" in thinking state and private employees could work to aid the retarded under the same roof.

"When there are two leaders in a building," Ms. Hoffman said, "and workers go around saying, 'Should I report to UCP supervisor X or state worker Y?' there's got to be a snowballing effect."

"We were hoping the situation would settle down," she added, "but it's been more than a year now, and it hasn't set-

tled down."

Ms. Hoffman also said that independent audits conducted of the exclusively private buildings are "quite complimentary."

"It's just in the shared-staff buildings where the tension has to be relieved," she said.

Robert Schonhorn, executive director of UCP, a not-for-profit group relying heavily on government funds, said yesterday Coughlin's plan is "news to me," adding he will fight "all the way" any effort to strip him of control over the buildings.

"In fact," Schonhorn said, "at a meeting a month ago Commissioner Coughlin stated he would work with us in an attempt to see to it that we get our fair share of state employees."

Absenteeism in the shared-staff buildings is "extremely high," Schonhorn conceded, sometimes to the point where the handicapped residents suffered. But he said the UCP-run buildings are "markedly improved over what they

were" under state leadership.

King, an ardent critic of the UCP takeover, lauded what he called "a state promise to get UCP out of the buildings."

"It confirms what we've been saying all along," King said. "State employees are more qualified to take care of the retarded residents than the private workers."

The UCP takeover of buildings at the 382-acre developmental center marked the first time that a state institution relinquished some of its business to the private sector.

Asked for by parents of Willowbrook's mentally retarded residents, the takeover resulted in the transfer of approximately 500 state workers to other buildings on the center's grounds. In turn, the palsy group hired about 1,000 of its own, non-union employees.

The UCP portion of Willowbrook is to be dedicated the Karl D. Warner complex on Sept. 30, honoring the longtime supporter of cerebral palsy programs.