

Willowbrook officials warned to act quickly or face court charges

Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels yesterday, as expected, formally ordered state officials to bring staffing at the Staten Island Developmental Center up to minimum court-mandated levels or face civil contempt proceedings.

The judge, acting on the request of parents of center residents and other concerned with staffing levels, gave the state until Jan. 30 to provide him with an employee staffing audit of the 2,200-bed Willowbrook institution.

Bartels warned, however, that he would consider a request to cite state officials for contempt at any time if he is handed evidence showing the state is not moving "with all deliberate speed" to meet staffing requirements.

The judge named Gov. Carey, Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin and the institution's director, Elin M. Howe, as the officials responsible for following the directives of the court and the defendants for possible contempt action.

At a hearing Wednesday, Coughlin conceded that staffing levels at the institution for the mentally retarded are not in compliance with worker-to-patient ratios set out in the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree.

Coughlin told Bartels the state would increase hiring and promotions at the institution to bring staffing levels up to minimum standards.

Meanwhile, state mental retardation officials announced yesterday that they have complied with Bartel's March directive requiring an increased allocation to the Consumer Advisory Board at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

William Knowlton, a spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said that the state Legislature Wednesday allocated an additional \$81,000 to the board, which acts as guardian for approximately 1,000 current and former center residents without parents. The allocation increases the board's budget to \$146,000.

"We simply did not have a large enough staff to thoroughly review the cases before us and make proper recommendations about their future treatment," said Jerry Isaacs, a member of the board. "After we were unable to get the state to increase the allocation, we went to the court and the judge ordered the state to offer us the extra help."

Isaacs said the extra money will be used to hire additional staff.

While approving the request for additional funds for the Consumer Advisory Board, the Legislature Wednesday rejected a request by the state to give employees of the Willowbrook Review Panel the cost-of-living increase awarded other state workers.

"We made the request on behalf of the Review Panel but it apparently was turned down," Knowlton said. The 5 percent salary increases would have increased the panel's budget from \$300,000 a year to \$313,000.

According to legislative sources, the legislators were concerned about a recent audit by state Comptroller Arthur Levitt that Review Panel members, who are compensated up to \$200 a day for their services, had not adequately documented their vouchers.

The increases, however, would have been paid to review panel staff members, who receive regular weekly salaries.