

But is it any better?

\$336M spent to improve Willowbrook

By BRUCE ALPERT

A series of federal court orders mandating improved care for more than 5,000 former and current Staten Island Developmental Center residents has cost taxpayers \$336 million, according to a report by state mental retardation officials.

But parties involved in the lawsuit that resulted in the court orders disagree on what the money has meant. Some say the Willowbrook center is vastly improved, while others maintain only token progress has resulted, with the quality of life at the institution largely the same as when the court case

was brought in 1971.

The state accounting of court-related expenses was ordered last May by state Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin following an Advance story reporting that officials were unsure how much money had been allocated as a result of the court order. The directive, ordered a reversal of "inhumane and shocking" conditions at the center, formerly known as the Willowbrook State School.

The Advance story, which followed an extensive study by a team of reporters, estimated that in excess of \$100 million had been spent to implement the required improvements, most of which

were mandated under terms of the so-called Willowbrook Consent Decree.

The state study, completed by mental hygiene budget aides, found more than \$200 million in additional state allocations that officials say are directly attributable to the court orders dating back to 1972. The Advance study concerned itself with court-related costs dating from the 1975 court order, which provided a detailed timetable for improvements at the Willowbrook institution.

According to the state report, \$215.7 million has been spent to upgrade programs and staffing at the Staten Island Developmental Center and 12-related facilities, where many of the residents

have been transferred.

Almost \$79.4 million has been allocated for administration and the development of several dozen agencies charged with overseeing the institution, or implementing court orders to transfer center residents to community facilities, the state study said.

In addition, \$42.3 million has been spent to upgrade other state facilities for the retarded in an effort to "phase in" the improvements mandated at the Willowbrook center, according to state officials.

In releasing the figures, Coughlin, director of the state's 18 institutions for the retarded, said there is no question

the cost of the court judgments were expensive "and that some people will consider the \$300 million plus allocation to be excessive."

"But you have to go back to the 1960s," Coughlin said. "Willowbrook was a place that brought a lot of shame to the state government and to society in general. There were 150-bed wards, unclothed people and the number of deaths that occurred there every month was unconscionable."

Today, three years after Gov. Carey agreed to sign the 1975 judgment, Coughlin said the "quality of life has improved immeasurably" at the Willowbrook institution and the facility's

death rate has been cut in half.

Coughlin said very little of the \$336 million was wasted, although he added that theft of state property remains a serious problem at the Island center and other state facilities.

In one example, police in February reported 55,000 towels valued at \$60,000 stolen from the Willowbrook center. The thieves were never caught.

"We are taking steps to prevent the theft of state property, and I'd say we are making quite a bit of progress," Coughlin said.

Anthony Pinto, president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, and Chris

Hansen, an attorney who helped bring the lawsuit on behalf of the institution's residents in 1971, maintained that the \$336 million has resulted in only limited progress.

"I would say that there are still substantially few people whose lives are substantially better," said Hansen, an attorney for the Mental Health Law Project. "The fact that people are no longer sitting naked in the wards and the state is now giving people clothing is not the point of the lawsuit."

Hansen said the state's major failure has been its inability to meet court timetables for placing residents into smaller community facilities, where, he maintained, they have the greatest chance of reaching their potential. He also said the state has failed to provide those remaining at the institution with six hours of programming a day, as required by the court order.

"I may be wrong, but it has always seemed odd to me that the amount of money being poured into Willowbrook doesn't produce more than it produces," Hansen said.