

Our opinion

A new New York disgrace

It was at the beginning of this decade that our state was disgraced by the revelation that it was "warehousing" tens of thousands of mentally retarded individuals in large institutions, institutions at which human beings were subjected to conditions most civilized individuals thought had passed with the Dark Ages.

Hanging its head in shame, New York promised to change.

It promised the public, and several courts of law, that large institutions such as the former Willowbrook State School would be dismantled over a period of years. It promised that those patients able to do so would be permitted to live in the community on their own; others would be placed in small, neighborhood-based group homes, where they would receive decent care and be able to realize their potential.

But now, in attempting to live up to those ambitious promises, New York may be creating what will become its disgrace of the 1980s. Its ballyhooed effort to break up large institutions seems, in some cases, to

involve little more than shifting retarded persons out of state-run "warehouses" and into smaller "warehouses" operated by private citizens, for profit.

As documented in the Sunday Advance today, the transfer of a retarded person from a large institution to a small, privately-run facility is in itself no guarantee that the individual will be better served or better cared for.

In the case of so-called single room occupancy hotels in Manhattan — where many retarded individuals have ended up upon their discharge from state-run institutions — former patients might actually have enjoyed better food, better shelter and better recreational programming while they were in the care of the state.

The state — unwittingly or not — may be perpetrating a cruel hoax on many individuals discharged from institutions, as well as on those many public officials and private citizens desiring quality, humane care for the retarded.

The state may think it is doing the

retarded a favor by releasing them from institutions and turning them out to community-based facilities. In many cases, unfortunately, that action may be a real disservice.

We do not dispute the claim that deinstitutionalization must be the ideal if retarded persons, now and in the future, are to be entitled to realize their potential and to become a productive part of the community.

But by turning out to the community individuals of limited ability — without adequate supervision and review of the facilities in which they are placed — the state is not only missing the real goals of deinstitutionalization but also is laying the groundwork for another, potentially more serious scandal.

Size alone does not constitute a warehouse for the retarded. A retarded person may just as easily be neglected in a community setting as in an institutional one.

The seeds of such neglect already are being sown. It's the state's urgent responsibility to make sure they do not take root.