

Methods under fire

Date set to remove autistic children from R.I. center

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ALBANY — The father of an autistic Huguenot teen-ager said yesterday he is afraid that the transfer of his youngster and 13 others to a new state facility will "result in major harm" to the children.

State education officials announced yesterday that the 14 children, all of whom are patients in a controversial Providence, R.I. center, will be moved to a new 24-bed unit at the O.D. Heck Developmental Center near Schenectady. The state ordered the youngsters removed from the Behavior Research Institute by mid-February after state inspectors last month objected to the use of physical punishment as a behavior modification technique by institute staff.

Carl Hemple said his 17-year-old son, Mark, has been taught by institute staff to control his behavior and is no longer as much of a threat to hurt himself and others. Hemple said he doubts the state can create an effective program by Feb. 15, the target date for the unit's opening.

"The state has been so slow in the past in just making payments for the Providence center that I can't believe they will have a program ready to go on that date," Hemple said. "And we're afraid they'll use drugs to pacify the children, when they are all able to function now for the first time in their lives without drugs."

But Louis Grumet, an associate commissioner for the state Education Department, said the state program will be superior to those at the Behavior Research Institute.

There will be 80 staff members for 24 residents at Heck, Grumet said, compared to 60 staffers for 37 patients, in-

cluding Mark Hemple and a second Island teen-ager, at the Providence center.

The cost at Heck will be \$54,000 per child annually compared to the \$38,000 the state is paying at Providence.

Grumet told parents that there will be no use of physical restraints or drugs to control the youths.

Hemple and other parents say such techniques are used in some institutions. They contend that the Providence center's use of a program that combines rewards for good behavior and punishment for dangerous anti-social conduct is preferable.

Cora Hoffman, special assistant to state Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin, said yesterday that the goal of the Heck program will be to prepare the youngsters for transfer to smaller community facilities.

"We anticipate some problems at the beginning of the program — there is always some trauma when youngsters are transferred from one place to another — but we expect to provide an excellent program, Ms. Hoffman said. "Of course, the goal will be to provide community placement as soon as possible."

Ms. Hoffman said the state is also planning to contract with private agencies in New York City and western New York to set up two private programs for autistic children to supplement the services provided at the Heck unit. Discussions are under way with two private agencies in the hopes of establishing the programs in the near future, she said.