

Editorial page-

Our opinion

# Compounding the problem

On the heels of the revelation that a Princes Bay boarding house occupied by former psychiatric patients appears to be in violation of health and building codes has come the even more startling disclosure that the state passed up a chance to help those former patients, and others like them, when it had the opportunity to do so last year.

The state's Office of Mental Health, available evidence indicates, was informed last summer of squalid conditions at the former Christmas Tree Inn. It was told that boarding house occupants, including one-time patients at the South Beach Psychiatric Center, lived under conditions one public official has termed "life threatening."

But mental health bureaucrats, it seems, were not impressed. They rejected the psychiatric center's proposal that it staff the boarding house full-time so the estimated 20 persons living there would receive essential care.

What the Office of Mental Health did approve was a hospital-based referral unit that is supposed to place former psychiatric patients in com-

munity-based residential facilities — including, quite possibly, the former Christmas Tree Inn.

We do not question the need for such placement units to accommodate former psychiatric patients or, in some cases, individuals being discharged from facilities like the Staten Island Developmental Center.

But establishment of referral centers before development of programs to help former patients of the state or to monitor care provided by third parties is a bad case of misplaced priorities.

The state is doing its best to return institutionalized individuals to the community through its placement program. But it has done almost nothing to make sure that such individuals — once discharged — receive proper food and shelter and are exposed to rehabilitation or recreation programs essential to their well-being.

As we've observed previously, the state only compounds the problems of mentally ill or mentally retarded persons if it shifts them from state-run centers to private facilities

where levels of care may be inferior to what was available at the larger institutions.

Unchecked, the large-scale discharge of the mentally ill or retarded to the community without proper planning and careful monitoring could create a scandal even more serious than that which followed disclosure of patient "warehousing" and abuse at facilities such as the former Willowbrook State School earlier this decade.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly of West Brighton, who chairs the Assembly's Mental Health Committee, has questioned the wisdom of setting up new referral units unless the state is certain it has decent facilities to refer its clients to.

Mrs. Connelly, we hope, will take the lead in fighting an obviously absurd situation that has grown out of the state's commendable deinstitutionalization effort. The well-being of thousands of former patients — as well as that of residents of communities in which the patients are placed — depends on the immediate reversal of the state's cart-before-the-horse mentality.