

Doubts expressed over meeting Willowbrook 1981 placement level

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ALBANY — State Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin yesterday said that the state may be unable to comply with a court order to reduce Staten Island Developmental Center's resident population to 250 by 1981.

Testifying at state budget hearings, Coughlin for the first time publicly conceded that the state may not be able to open enough community residences to meet the mandate of the so-called Willowbrook Consent Decree. The decree was signed by Gov. Carey in 1975 to settle a lawsuit by parents of residents and civil rights groups, who charged inhumane conditions at the Willowbrook in-

stitution violated basic human rights.

"I suppose we could be put and just make placements for placement sake," Coughlin said. "But we haven't taken that position. My priority is to see that each and every placement is a quality placement and not to play a numbers' game."

The Staten Island Developmental Center currently has a population of 2,200. Community placements of the 5,000 Willowbrook class members covered by the court decree's are running at about half the court decrees requirement of 50 a month. Many of the class members are now in other state and privately run institutions.

Coughlin said community opposition

to group homes and the difficulty in placing residents remaining at state institutions, many of whom are more severely disabled than those already placed, have made the placement goal more difficult to reach.

"We are going all out to meet our goals, and we will if everything goes right," Coughlin said. "But I can't make any promises."

Cora Hoffman, spokeswoman for Coughlin, said there appears to be two alternatives that the courts may soon have to consider: One would be to extend the 1981 deadline to give the state time to develop more community residences. The other would allow use of in-

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