

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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intermediate-care facilities housing more than 10 residents, the maximum number prescribed by the consent decree.

During more than two hours of testimony before a joint hearing of the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee, Coughlin also said:

¶ The state is moving ahead with plans to build a \$500,000 biological hazard facility at the Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook. Coughlin said the facility will safeguard the transfer of waste materials from biological experiments at the center. In addition, institute officials said the facility will enable them to begin experimenting with viruses believed to cause mental retardation.

¶ Defended last year's transfer of approximately \$3 million within his budget to make up for deficit in several community retardation programs. The Bureau of the Budget had said the procedure was "clandestine," but Coughlin said they were necessary to keep programs going. He did promise, however, to consult with Legislative leaders before making any large-scale transfers of funds.

¶ Responding to a question by Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, he said that the state has not yet decided what it will do with the 384-acre Willowbrook institution when the facility's population reaches 250. Coughlin said he agreed with Mrs. Connelly that planning for the future use of "this valuable property" should begin soon.

¶ Reported that the state has hired a consultant for \$35,000 to improve inventory control at state developmental centers. Last year, the Advance reported that more than 60,000 towels were missing from the Staten Island Developmental Center.

¶ Absenteeism at the Staten Island Developmental Center has been reduced, but is still nearly double the 6 percent rate at upstate institutions. Coughlin said Willowbrook union leaders are now working with the state to try to reduce absenteeism.

¶ Said he was generally pleased with the \$531-million budget given his department in the governor's executive budget, a change from last year when he complained about severe cuts made at several developmental centers, including Willowbrook.

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