

Willowbrook panel OKs Manhattan center to continue care for 125

By BRUCE ALPERT

The Willowbrook Review panel has agreed to allow a Manhattan retardation center to continue caring for 125 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents.

The panel, a court-appointed monitor of services provided former and current residents at the Willowbrook institution, had urged the Brooklyn Federal Court to order the one-year-old center closed by Sept. 30. Panel members said the program, operated by New York Medical College at Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital, provided substandard care, even though it has operated with a record-annual Medicaid rate of \$89,435 a patient.

But in a court session yesterday before Judge John R. Bartels, panel representatives reported that hospital officials had made some progress in meeting minimum-care standards required by a 1975 court decree. Much of the improvement occurred, they said, after release of the panel's unfavorable audit, which was released two months ago.

Panel members, however, asked Bartels to ban future admissions to the East Harlem center until it could reach an agreement with center officials for further improvements.

Bartels denied the request after state Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas R. Coughlin said the hospital was losing \$4,000 a month because it was 26 patients below the enrollment hospital officials say is needed to break even financially.

Coughlin said the hospital will now admit 26 new patients, many of whom are residents in acute-care hospitals in the city that are not equipped to deal with the mentally retarded.

Much of the improvements at the hospital have been credited to Alfonse Sorhaindo, a former official at Manhattan Developmental Center, named program director on March 19.

For nearly six months, the center had operated without a program director. Dr. Margaret Giannini, the program's initial director, resigned suddenly last October. State officials said it was her reputation in the mental retardation field that persuaded them to fund the program at record levels — three times the Medicaid rate awarded state facilities for the retarded.

The failure of hospital officials to promptly replace Dr. Giannini was de-

scribed as an "unbelievable lapse" by panel members, especially since, they said, it was suffering from serious staffing and organizational problems.

Coughlin, who said the state was also disturbed by Dr. Giannini's resignation, contends that Sorhaindo's hiring has resolved most of the administrative problems.

"There is no longer any critical problem or threats to the life and safety of the residents," Coughlin said. "Everyone seems to agree that Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital is conducting its business properly."

Shortly after the program opened last May, six patients died. Although state officials denied any negligence by the hospital, Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein charged it was evidence of inadequate care.

Sorhaindo said the hospital, a subsidiary of the Archdiocese of New York, is now committed to making "the program the best program" in the country. It now serves 125 severely retarded and multiple handicapped residents, who the state concedes were neglected for years in the Gouverneur unit of Manhattan Developmental Center before their transfer last May.

"We want to prepare every resident to live in the community," Sorhaindo