

Willowbrook panel still wants better care at Manhattan center

By BRUCE ALPERT

The executive director of the Willowbrook Review Panel said yesterday that a Manhattan center for the retarded is still not performing up to court-mandated standards and will be asked to close unless it improves services.

Katherine Schaninger, director of the court-appointed panel, made the statement to "clarify" a recent panel announcement that it had dropped a recommendation made in February to close the center by Sept. 30.

The center at Manhattan's Flower & Fifth Ave. Hospital provides care for 125 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents, all of whom are profoundly retarded and multihandicapped.

Ms. Schaninger said a recent panel inspection found serious program deficiencies at the center, which is operated by New York Medical College, a subsidiary of the Archdiocese of New York. Among them, she said, were inadequate facilities for the various therapeutic programs provided the residents, who were transferred to the center from the Gouverneur unit of Manhattan Developmental Center last May.

The center, believed to be the most expensive facility for the retarded in the country, has been charged with mismanagement almost since it first opened. Six of the 160 patients originally enrolled in the center died in the center's first few months of operation. Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein blamed the deaths on inadequate care.

State retardation officials said a long delay in replacing Dr. Margaret Giannini, the original program director of the center who resigned in October, further hampered efforts to organize the center. Medical college officials finally named Alfonse Sorhaindo, a former official at Manhattan Developmental Center, to replace Dr. Giannini on March 19, five months after her resignation.

"The center was badly organized as it was, but without a program director it was really a disaster."

said an official with the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

The review panel's decision to drop its recommendation to close the center was prompted by a desire to give state and center officials a full opportunity to bring it up to court standards, Ms. Schaninger said.

But if substantial improvement is not made in the next few months, the panel will renew its recommendation to transfer the 125 patients to another facility, she said.

Such a request would be made to Brooklyn Federal Court Judge John R. Bartels, who is assigned to monitor enforcement of a 1975 court decree mandating a minimum level of services for former and current Staten Island Developmental Center residents.

State Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin said closing the center would be a serious mistake.

Substantial progress in conforming to the court decree is being made as a result of recent action taken by Sorhaindo, the new program director, he said. Coughlin has always maintained that the center's high pricetag — it receives an annual Medicaid rate of \$89,435 a patient — is justified because of the serious needs of its patients.

In an interview, Ms. Schaninger disputed a report by Coughlin that the panel has attempted to block admissions of other patients to the Manhattan center. Ms. Schaninger said the panel, although it has expressed reservations about moving in new patients while the center's operations were considered substandard, only has jurisdiction over former and current patients at the Willowbrook institution. Therefore, she said the state could move patients into the center without panel approval.

Coughlin recently charged that the hospital was losing thousands of dollars a month because it was 26 patients below the enrollment it needs to break even financially. He said the panel had blocked efforts to place 26 patients, all of whom "were seriously in need of the provided" at the services, in the hospital.