

State's retardation chief, ex-Willowbrook boss may get corrections post

By DIANE C. LORE

Gov. Carey is expected to announce today the appointment of Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd to head the state's prison system.

Coughlin, who three years ago served as acting director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, will succeed Richard Hongisto as commissioner of the state Corrections Department.

Hongisto withdrew after a battle with the state Senate over his confirmation. Observers predict Coughlin will not face much Senate opposition if his name is submitted for the corrections post. The Senate unanimously approved his nomination as retardation commissioner in April 1978.

Coughlin's name emerged over the weekend as the most likely of five possible nominations for the position. If he's appointed, he will move from overseeing 18 state-run facilities for the mentally retarded to running the state's 33 prisons, which house more than 20,000 inmates.

The 42-year-old Brooklyn native has no experience in correctional services. He is a former state trooper. Coughlin supporters, however, say his record with the Office of Mental Retardation shows him to be a tough fiscal administrator with a good sense of planning and a personal involvement with his work.

His involvement with state-run facilities for the retarded began in 1962, with the birth of a daughter who was retarded and handicapped. When he placed her in a state-run facility he was bitterly disappointed with the results and began active movements to aid the retarded.

At his first press conference as the acting director of the Staten Island Developmental Center in March 1976, Coughlin called himself a "rah, rah" administrator and promised to be "very visible in the wards."

His consideration for the corrections post comes at a crucial time for the Office of Mental Retardation. Under the Willowbrook Consent Decree the state must empty its largest institutions for the retarded by placing clients in community-based "group homes," and



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Coughlin is in charge of the job. Proposals for "group homes" are facing stiff opposition from communities and Coughlin must mediate and rule on the disputes.

Aides to Coughlin said he had already decided, however, to resign as Mental Retardation Commissioner in December to pursue a different field. "I think he felt he had worked long and hard in the field of mental retardation, and he had done whatever good he was going to do, so it was time to move on," said one staffer.

Coughlin's appointment or resignation would leave executive deputy commissioner James E. Itrone, 34, as acting commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation, with the possibility of Gov. Carey naming him permanently to the post.