

Seven years have passed since disclosure of the atrocities at the Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island forced New York State to abandon its policy of confining the mentally retarded to large institutions. A United States District Court decree mandated return of residents to home counties to be cared for in small-group homes, individual apartments and foster and natural families. Although the state has met community resistance in implementing this decree, it has also been impeded by its own confused priorities. A prime example is its circumvention of a recent State Supreme Court decision, in *Sundheimer v. Kolb*, that provided financial assistance for natural parents caring for their retarded children at home. As a result of the state's action, Willowbrook parents are soon to return to Federal court to urge, once again, compliance with the decree.

Today, only 3 percent, or 15,000, of New York's 500,000 retarded citizens reside in state institutions. Nevertheless, most of the state's money for residential care is still poured into these obsolescent establishments. Only 10 percent to 20 percent of the budget is left for the much-larger number of retarded persons who require assistance to live in the community.

Community care is more humane than institutional care and the cost to the state for total care, including room, board and adequate support services, is far less. Family care is most economical since the parent already has a household. State assistance in cash or direct services totaling roughly \$10,000 a year is sufficient to enable parents of modest means to take care of a retarded child at home. Apartment-living programs and community group residences are fine alternatives when properly supervised. They cost more than family care but less than the \$25,000 to \$45,000 spent annually per person in large state institutions.

Considering the large number of re-

Willowbrook Victims

By Harry H. Gordon



tarded persons in the community needing care, and limited state resources, family-care assistance should have a top priority. Unfortunately, it does not, as demonstrated by the aftermath of *Sundheimer v. Kolb*. At issue in the case was the state's family-care program for retarded persons, which certifies families to serve as foster parents. In addition to standard state and Federal welfare grants that foster

parents get, the state reimburses them for food, clothing and other basic necessities for the children.

Not all families, however, were considered eligible for this aid. Under Department of Mental Hygiene regulations, natural parents who had placed their children in a state institution for more than two years, and foster parents, were eligible; natural parents who had never institutionalized their