

Connelly: There's limit to closing Willowbrook

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly yesterday raised doubts about the state's policy of emptying the Staten Island Developmental Center and said the institution for the retarded should lift a long-standing freeze on admissions.

Mrs. Connelly, who has generally been regarded as a staunch advocate of phasing patients out of institutions, suggested in a speech before a group of social workers that most of the 1,400 residents remaining in the center may not be suited for relocation to small community-based facilities.

The assemblywoman also said she would favor using Willowbrook, as the center is still commonly called, to accommodate those of the Island's multi-handicapped persons now residing at home.

"Deinstitutionalization is a problem all over the state, and I have very serious reservations about what has happened," Mrs. Connelly told a meeting of the Staten Island Council, Association of Social Workers.

While conceding serious past abuses at Willowbrook, she affirmed in an interview after the meeting, "I truly do not believe we can phase out our institutions."

Early in the decade, aroused by extensive documentation of overcrowding and inhumane treatment of residents at Willowbrook, parents of residents filed suit against the state of New York, which operates the institution. The parents were represented in their legal fight by watchdog organizations for the retarded. In 1975, a consent decree was signed in the case, requiring reduction of the center's population to 250 residents by 1981, from a high of more than 6,000 in the 1960s.

Mrs. Connelly, who characterized her perspective as that of a "consumer," said yesterday that she was not questioning community placement of the retarded as a "concept."

"If you go to the couple of group homes on Staten Island where the retarded reside, you will find that they operate quite well," she said.

But she hedged her approval by observing that "these individuals are quite obviously a higher functioning type."

"The individuals at the Developmental Center whom the state now wishes to put out are no longer at a higher functioning level," Mrs. Connelly, a Democrat, said. "I don't see the rationale for

phasing out these people."

Regarding the ban on admissions to Willowbrook, Mrs. Connelly said, "I'd like to see it lifted."

The assemblywoman proposed to open the institution to retarded persons with multiple physical and behavioral handicaps. "Those are the ones we cannot place," she said. "Families are being destroyed because they can't get these people into a secure structure."

Willowbrook was closed to new residents in 1971, when a Brooklyn Federal Court judge agreed to hear the parents' case. Only another court order could change admissions policy.

Mrs. Connelly noted that she has sponsored legislation that would release Medicaid funds for home care of the multi-handicapped. But she said her bill, co-sponsored by Assemblyman Denis J. Butler, D-Long Island, does not address the entire problem.

"The parents cannot cope with these children as they grow bigger in size and stronger," she said. "The state has that obligation."

Reached last night, Murray B. Schneps, a parent of a retarded child and a handicapped rights advocate, was sharply critical of the assemblywoman's remarks.

"She's subscribing to the mentality that it's all right for people to go downhill who are almost at the bottom of the hill anyway," said Schneps, a member of a court-appointed panel to monitor the institution. "Well, that's a humane decision. I'm glad she's not the one who has to make that decision."

Schneps contended that community-based care is feasible regardless of a handicapped person's level of functioning.

"The court's mandate is for the least restrictive environment," he continued, "not for what Connelly's sensibilities can accept."

Mrs. Connelly said the views she expressed to the social workers should not be interpreted as a reversal of her past position on Willowbrook. "I try to be consistent whenever I speak before a group," she said after the meeting.

But Mrs. Connelly told her audience yesterday in the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, Clifton: "The state and the professionals are simply not listening to the public who are saying, 'We do not want any more impact on our communities with group homes, hostels and halfway houses.'"