

# Group home dispute spurs resignations

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

A state proposal to double the rate at which handicapped residents are transferred from institutions to community-based group homes has prompted the resignation of a top state official and at least three of her aides.

The proposal, announced privately by Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne at a meeting Nov. 17 with court-appointed monitors of the Staten Island Developmental Center, aims to drastically reduce institutional populations in the five boroughs over the next 15 months. Although the state has consistently espoused this goal, it has never succeeded in meeting monthly placement quotas designed to achieve it.

In a letter professing "fundamental disagreement" with the state's proposal, Dr. Jennifer Howse, associate commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, has submitted her resignation, which formally takes effect Jan. 31. Dr. Howse is to leave her post today for an extended vacation, state officials said yesterday.

Introne is seeking permission to transfer at least 1,700 patients from institutions including the developmental center into small community facilities by March 31, 1981, according to participants of the Nov. 17 meeting. This translates to roughly 100 residents a month, about four times the average of 23 placements made in any month during the past four years.

On Saturday, the Willowbrook Review

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Panel, the group that oversees conditions at the developmental center, voted a formal recommendation "informing the commissioner to abandon those goals and to meet with us to negotiate for approval on a plan," Murray B. Schneps, one of the seven panel members, said yesterday.

Under a federal court order, placement quotas for the handicapped patients concerned must be agreed on by the state and the review panel.

"The panel has grave concerns about the period of time allotted by the state for such a massive transfer," said Katherine A. Schwaninger, executive director of the review panel. "It could be done but, given the timing, it would end up detrimental to the clients."

Ms. Schwaninger said the state's proposal failed to consider the availability of "support services, additional staffing and proper living environment."

Dr. Howse and Introne could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Under the provisions of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a federal court judgment to which the state agreed in 1975, the developmental center, formerly known as the Willowbrook State School, is to be emptied of all but 250 residents by May 1981. The institution's population peaked at more than 6,000 in the 1960s and has since been reduced to about 1,400.

Many developmental center residents were relocated into other large state-run institutions, instead of being placed in the group homes intended by the consent decree.

The decree was the culmination of a years-long federal court case brought by parents of Willowbrook residents in response to extensive documentation of overcrowded and inhumane conditions at the state institution.

According to Ms. Schwaninger, resident transfers from institutions to group homes have averaged 23 a month, with

just one highly exceptional month, when 54 transfers were made.

Community placement has been hampered by vociferous opposition from neighborhoods in which group homes were to be created. State officials also have cited red tape for the delays.

State officials and review panel members predicted yesterday that the terms of the consent decree would not be met by the 1981 deadline.

Schneps added that the review panel would be amenable to postponement of the target date for the purpose of "maintaining quality" as residents are phased out of the developmental center. "Our position was never a numbers game," Schneps said. "We'll accept a few more years or a lot more years, but it has to be done right."

The state, review panelists contend, has not been sincere in its commitment to a community-based system of care for the retarded, despite its expressed commitment to "the speedy evacuation of its unwieldy institutions."

Schneps continued: "We still feel the state has not accepted the consent decree as part and parcel of its responsibilities, as part of the bureaucracy. The decree is viewed as a great big wart, not as an intrinsic part of the body. The only way to accomplish its goal is dumping."

Dr. Howse, 34, undertook her job as associate commissioner at an annual salary of \$46,300 in the spring of 1978. Before her appointment, she had been executive director of the Willowbrook Review Panel since its formation in 1975. In her letter of resignation, Dr. Howse, who holds a doctorate in language development, related plans to accept a position similar to the one she is leaving, with the state of Pennsylvania.

Joining Dr. Howse in today's exodus from the state office are Louise Brown, her administrative assistant, and Dorothy Rowe and Sister Mary Paul, both of whom are in charge of community placement.