

State: Empty SIDC quickly

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

State officials yesterday defended a plan to virtually shut down the Staten Island Developmental Center by 1981 against charges that the plan values speed above humane considerations.

"Anyone who tells me it won't work has the obligation to tell me what goal is realizable," James E. Introne, commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said yesterday. "When I think I can deliver on that promise, why deny somebody the opportunity to move?"

The state's proposal has drawn fire from the associate commissioner for mental retardation, who resigned in protest, and from court-appointed monitors of the developmental center.

Officials contend that the state can reverse chronic delays in a four-year-old effort to phase out the developmental center population and that they can nearly quadruple the past rate of resident relocation to other facilities.

"Don't look at the last few years to

judge what we can do in the future," Introne said. He explained that "a variety of procedural changes" would ease the evacuation of approximately 1,500 residents — some of whom are in buildings privately run by the United Cerebral Palsy Association — within the coming 15 months, leaving not more than 250 profoundly handicapped persons at the developmental center.

Residents are to be transferred to other institutions and small community-based facilities in New York City and Long Island.

The chief procedural innovation planned by the state is a special unit to seek out and secure placement sites, Introne said. The unit would be formed under the umbrella of the Facilities Development Corp., which is charged with acquiring property and buildings for state agencies.

"That has to be a positive step because previously the mental retardation work was put in with the requests of other agencies," observed Elin M. Howe, director of the developmental

center.

Miss Howe added that the state is stepping up a community relations program that "should be somewhat helpful to the effort." The effort to open group homes and intermediate care facilities, as the neighborhood-based facilities are called, has been stymied by local residents' resistance to the idea of a pocket of disabled persons in their midst.

State policy has been to give contracts to private non-profit agencies for the operation of group homes. This practice, too, will be altered, Introne said, and the state will begin operating facilities itself when volunteer agencies are not forthcoming.

Introne announced plans for the accelerated placement program at a private meeting with the Willowbrook Review Panel, court-appointed overseers of the developmental center. The panel subsequently voted against the plan. Under a federal court order, placement strategies for developmental center residents must be agreed on by the state and the review panel.

But Introne shrugged off the panel's negative response. "These are administrative goals," he said, "and we're planning our resources in reference to these goals."

In a letter of resignation officially taking effect Jan. 31, the associate commissioner of mental retardation, Dr. Jennifer Howse, cited "fundamental disagreement" with the state proposal. She said:

"For the last four years, the Office of Mental Retardation has an excellent track record for real quality in New York City, based on a carefully planned foundation and incremental growth. . .

To jeopardize that record at this point to reach a judicial deadline that is most likely negotiable seems pointless."

The new state plan was designed to conform with the provisions of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a federal court judgment to which the state agreed in 1975. The decree evolved out of a suit brought by parents of Willowbrook residents in response to wretched

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State says it can empty developmental center quickly

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conditions at the state institution for the retarded.

Emptying the developmental center of nearly all residents by May 1981 is a provision of the decree that the state has thus far been unable to realize on schedule.

Review panel members have accused Introne of drastically accelerating the placement goals to be free of their influence. If the deadline for phasing out the developmental center were met, the panel would become defunct.

From then on, the state could conceivably opt to shelve its avowed policy of phasing handicapped persons out of un-

wieldy institutions into the more intimate facilities which, as a party to the Willowbrook Consent Decree, it has deemed healthier.

Introne insisted that his office did not consider the panel in when formulating the state placement plans. The "compelling" reason for quickening placement, he said, is to provide "the least-restrictive possible environment" for developmental center patients.

Not all 1,500 residents, however, will be moved directly from the developmental center into community facilities. Many, if not most, of them will make at least a waystop at other institutions, Introne indicated.

The developmental center's population has already declined from a high of more than 6,000 in the 1960s to 1,719 last November. Since 1975, 867 residents have been placed in group homes or similar facilities, according to state statistics. The rest, numbering in the thousands, were transferred to other institutions.

Those thousands, said Cora Hoffman, a spokeswoman for Introne are generally less disabled than the 1,719 persons still residing at the developmental center. Those less disabled persons will receive priority, she said, in future placements to group homes. Residents due to be evacuated from the developmental center under the stepped-up plan will presumably go to wait their turn in institutions.