

Our opinion

Some very important questions

Despite potentially great personal political risk, Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly has invited discussion on an important subject by publicly expressing doubts about the federally mandated program for emptying the Staten Island Developmental Center of all but 250 residents by 1981.

Rather than the quick condemnation she has received from some quarters, Mrs. Connelly deserves to be commended for daring to articulate some very fundamental questions about the so-called Willowbrook Consent Decree. Those questions, which others have dared not to pose, demand thoughtful consideration as the deadline for implementation of the consent decree's ultimate provision approaches.

The landmark decree, negotiated in federal court in 1975, was a necessary response to unquestionably scandalous conditions at what was then the Willowbrook State School.

The horror that was Willowbrook is well known. Thousands of human beings, mentally retarded or suffering from various developmental disabilities, were herded together in what was, in effect, a warehouse for society's unwanted; patients were neglected, some were abused and few received the skilled care that might have enabled them to leave the institution and return to the community.

Under the consent decree's terms, most institutionalized individuals were to be placed in small group homes or community residences, where they could receive the humane care, treatment and assistance never provided — and probably not possible — at Willowbrook and other state-run facilities like it.

Thousands of persons already have taken up residence in hundreds of smaller facilities throughout the

state. The deinstitutionalization program has not been easily implemented, in large part due to community opposition to the establishment of group homes; nevertheless, the results thus far have been encouraging.

In order to achieve full compliance with the court order, the state must reduce the Staten Island Developmental Center's population — now about 1,400 persons — to just 250 in less than two years. Those who remain institutionalized would be profoundly retarded individuals who could not function in — and probably would not benefit from — a community setting.

While attempting to reach the court-mandated goal, the state has been barred from accepting any new residents at the Island center and other institutions like it.

As Mrs. Connelly told members of the Staten Island Council of the Association of Social Workers last week, the four-year admissions freeze has had an adverse impact on families with profoundly retarded children or young adults.

Provision of adequate care for such severely handicapped individuals is both time-consuming and costly, and without question beyond the physical, emotional and financial means of some families.

Mrs. Connelly has asked whether those families, and the handicapped, might not be better off if the admissions ban were relaxed. She also has questioned whether the Island center's population target of 250 might not be too arbitrary, forcing into the community individuals who might truly require some sort of institutional care.

Such questions are difficult to raise, and Mrs. Connelly's sincerity in doing so should not be doubted.

As head of the Assembly's Committee on Mental Health, Mrs. Connelly is well aware of past institutional abuses and of the many successes achieved through the community placement program.

Difficult as the assemblywoman's questions are to ask, they are even more difficult to answer.

No one wants to jeopardize a deinstitutionalization program that has provided a new and better life for thousands of persons who otherwise might have been condemned to existence on locked wards.

But neither should concerned citizens or government officials seek to overcompensate for past abuses by shuttering institutions without considering — given the benefit of few years of hindsight — whether that's really in everyone's best interests.

We certainly are not proposing that institutions arbitrarily be maintained, or be opened anew to a flood tide of disabled persons who simply are unwanted by their families. Nor are we suggesting that the state yield to those who would be quite happy to see the politically sensitive community placement program halted for good.

Rather, we believe only that Mrs. Connelly's concerns deserve a full and fair hearing by those individuals and groups involved in implementation of the consent decree's provisions.

When the court agreement was reached four years ago, everyone agreed with its concept and believed they knew what the decree would achieve. Now those beliefs and ideals have been tempered by experience and the passage of time; Mrs. Connelly's suggestion that common goals should be brought into focus once again is a practical proposal that ought not to be overlooked.