

Our opinion

A Willowbrook nightmare?

The Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook appears in recent years to have become almost as lax with administrative controls as it was with patient care standards prior to the issuance of a landmark federal court decree in 1975.

That conclusion can be drawn from a rather shocking audit report released by state Comptroller Edward Regan yesterday. Officials of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities are so red-faced at the study's documented findings of sloppy bookkeeping and inventory control that they've already moved to implement virtually every one of the auditors' recommendations for improvement.

While it's reassuring to know the center's pharmacy no longer will stock drugs that haven't been used in 25 years and that other fiscal and inventory controls will be tightened, a disturbing question remains: How were procedures at the institution allowed to become so sloppy in the first place?

The audit suggests no answer to that question, and state mental health officials make no effort to justify or offer excuses for the sort of carelessness uncovered by Mr. Regan's auditors.

One possible explanation is that the state, under a court-ordered deadline to discharge all but 250 of the

center's residents by next year, may have become so involved with the depopulation effort that its day-to-day administrative responsibilities were neglected in some cases.

But that raises another disturbing question: What will become of the thousands of persons moved out of Willowbrook, and other institutions like it, once the state's attentiveness to the crash depopulation program lapses?

That question has been asked with increasing frequency as the state's deinstitutionalization program progresses, though there have yet to be any satisfactory answers from the state.

Mr. Regan's audit report, and others like it, have done an exceptional job of telling New Yorkers what's wrong with the Island developmental center. But until it's known why problems develop, and what's going to be done to make sure new difficulties don't crop up as the manner in which the retarded and developmentally disabled are cared for undergoes a radical change, common sense suggests the state should not move too hastily to empty institutions.

The sort of problems uncovered at the Island center can't be dismissed as an isolated bad dream. They recur so frequently that a pattern emerges, and it's one of a lingering nightmare.