

## Blame faults on long-standing practices

# Willowbrook officials defend

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Mental retardation and Staten Island Developmental Center officials conceded yesterday that the center, the subject of a scathing state audit, suffers from management problems, but they insisted that the current administration is not to blame.

The faults uncovered by state auditors — including careless bookkeeping and negligence toward patients — arose in large part from the developmental center's stormy history and uncertain future, the officials said.

In the courts and in the public eye, the institution for the retarded in Willowbrook has been a focus of controversy throughout the past decade. Scandal and lawsuits have been accompanied by a constant turnover of staff and leadership.

"This facility is somewhat under a cloud," Atanas Kobryn, the center's business officer, said yesterday. "We

don't have the freedom of being able to attract the best people to work here."

But Kobryn, like other center supervisors, balked at assigning individual guilt for the institution's problems. They suggested instead that the nature of the institution made some questionable practices inevitable.

To blame are "systemic problems," in the words of James E. Introne, commissioner of the state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. "You can't translate every incident into individual culpability," he said yesterday.

Referring to the auditors' finding that two patient deaths might have been averted by staff, Introne said: "It's a large system with a lot of fragile people."

James Shea, the developmental center's deputy director for administration, also cited "systemic" problems. Fiscal mismanagement, he said, could result from employee ignorance rather

than from deliberate wrongdoing. "These are practices going on for years," he said. "The clerk in the cashier's office was never told to do the transaction otherwise; he was never properly trained."

The report of the Department of Audit and Control concluded that a "virtual disregard for accountability" at the developmental center constituted an "open invitation" to misappropriation of funds.

"Usually intermediate-level management staff is responsible for these practices," Shea said, "and in some cases they were negligent."

"But I'm not going to sit here and tell you I'm going to take disciplinary action, without knowing all the whys," he added. "The bottom line now is to move backwards to correct what we know."

According to Kobryn, "It is completely out of order to second guess" the past acts and decisions of employees. "Such incidents continue to happen because, as you know, we don't live in a totalitarian regime here."

Added Shea, "It's hard to have your hands in every part of the operation."

The Office of Mental Retardation has formally concurred with the auditors' recommendations for reform of management practices at the developmental center, and the center is due to submit next Friday a detailed progress report to State Comptroller Edward V. Regan.

# management efforts

"We're finally coming close to a relatively stable administration," said Introne. "I don't want to blame these individuals who were here before us. But we have a very sound administration now at Willowbrook. I have confidence in Elin Howe (the center's director), and I think that we're making a perfectly acceptable degree of progress given the many problems that existed."

When she was appointed, Miss Howe was touted as an ardent advocate of transfer of the handicapped from institutions to community-based group homes. Since then she has increasingly devoted herself to work with the Borough Developmental Services office, which coordinates community placement efforts, delegating the institution's day-to-day operations to her assistant, David Steindorf.

If all goes according to plan, and the state has drawn up written assurances that it will, Miss Howe's mission will be accomplished by May 1981. By that date, the developmental center is required by a federal court order to have reduced its population to 250 severely and profoundly disabled persons.

Since 1975 the center's population has been pared from about 5,000 to about 1,400, while its staff has climbed from about 3,100 to about 3,600.

As a result, the institution that Robert F. Kennedy once called "a snakepit" has been able to bring about a marked improvement in the quality of patient life.

The audit, released Wednesday, reports disorganization that allows a large margin for corruption in the handling of

patients' cash, state funds, material, supplies, food, clothing and equipment. Increasing illegal acts such as assault, vandalism and theft also are reported.

While affirming that "we're not going to take the audit lightly," Introne said he considered fiscal management less crucial than conscientious patient care.

"Show me where the audit talks about programs," he said. "A lot of money has been going into Willowbrook, and it is resulting in the better care and treatment of individuals on the program side. That is obviously our first concern, and it takes time, like anything."

Introne said staff increases have occurred mostly in direct care and clinical services. Eighty percent of the institution's \$44.5 million budget, he added, is allocated to personnel.

Addressing the question of whether humane considerations could not be met in concert with sound management practices, Shea commented, "Other corporations have similar problems, it's just that they don't have public audits."