

State unveils massive plan to cut Willowbrook population

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

More money, more manpower and the decentralization of power form the crux of a long-rumored state plan to virtually evacuate the Staten Island Developmental Center by April 1981.

State mental retardation officials had outlined the plan only verbally, and sketchily, until last Thursday, when they met a deadline by beginning to distribute printed copies to concerned authorities.

The plan is hefty both in its size — running more than 200 pages and bolstered by about five pounds of exhibits — and in its scope — to transfer about 1,440 retarded residents from the developmental center in Willowbrook within 14 months.

The product of brainstorming by a variety of state agencies, the placement plan presents a welter of bureaucratic innovations. As a state employee who helped to compile it noted, "different sections were farmed out to the appropriate authorities."

A couple of obvious consequences arise from the plan's diversity of authors. First, the profusion of numbers in its pages don't always balance. And second, no single state official seems capable of elucidating every section.

Among the placement plan's chief provisions are:

❑ Specialized teams to acquire sites for community-based eight- to twelve-bed facilities for the retarded.

❑ Additional state and federal Medicaid expenditure.

❑ New and increased fiscal recommendations in Gov. Carey's proposed 1981 budget, including \$64,557,200 for support services; \$33.6 million for capital construction, and authorization of a \$65-million bond issue from the state Housing Finance Agency.

Overall, the plan projects placement into small community facilities of 2,678 residents of New York City and Long Island developmental centers, along with the shuffling from outdated and oversized community settings of 1,157 dis-

abled persons. This movement of the disabled will be accompanied by shifting assignments for 2,702 state care staffers.

Since the placement plan's goal of so quickly whittling the Staten Island Developmental Center's nearly 1,700 residents down to a core of 250 by rearranging institutional populations throughout the greater metropolitan area became known, it has been the focus of considerable controversy.

In late November, while the plan was still largely under wraps, the associate commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) submitted her resignation, citing "fundamental disagreement" with the plan as a partial reason.

Alerted by the resignation, court-appointed monitors of the Staten Island Developmental Center went on to formally denounce the state's intentions as "irresponsible and dangerous."

When he established the seven monitors' role in 1975, a Brooklyn federal court judge required the state to obtain their agreement on any action taken with regard to the developmental center population. Accordingly, the monitors, called the Willowbrook Review Panel, met last December to discuss the state's plan, which had at that time been relayed to them only verbally, by OMRDD Commissioner James E. Introne.

On Dec. 13, the panel sent a letter to Introne demanding a "comprehensive written plan" by Jan. 31. Had it failed to meet the deadline, the state would not have been able to proceed with its placement plan unless it faced the panel in court.

Panel members have expressed doubt not only about the state's ability to meet its goal, but also about the sincerity of its motivation.

The aim of reducing the Staten Island Developmental Center to a 250-bed facility by April 1981 also stems from a federal court order, which took the shape of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed in 1975 by the state and representatives of current and former developmental center residents. State officials say they are proceeding in order not to be found in contempt of court.

Review panel members, however, note that since 1975 the state has not come close to meeting quotas of up to 50 placements a month from the institution into community-based facilities. They have expressed fears that if the state accomplishes accelerated placement, it will be at the cost of quality care.

The state's plan is designed to assure otherwise. As state officials concede, whether it will actually prove otherwise depends on whether people can be pushed as efficiently as paper.

"That decree very clearly says that every developmental center resident is entitled to the least restrictive environment. And the court has defined that environment as some kind of community living situation," Cora Hoffman, an assistant to Introne, said yesterday. "Nobody's going to go back on that pledge."

Kathleen A. Schwaninger, the review panel's executive director, said yesterday that she had not had a chance to read the plan since her copy was delivered on Thursday. Elin M. Howe, Staten Island Developmental Center director, did not return repeated phone calls yesterday.

Ms. Hoffman, echoing the words of the state's plan, singled out "community opposition" as the most serious obstacle to eventual community placement of retarded persons now institutionalized.

While some of the 1,440 Staten Island Developmental Center residents to be placed are to be transferred into other institutions in Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens, more than 1,000 disabled persons involved in the Staten Island exodus or displaced from the other institutions are slated for placement in community facilities.

The plan projects openings for 230 disabled persons in the Bronx; 340 in Brooklyn; 165 in Manhattan; 150 in Queens; 110 in Staten Island, and 112 in Suffolk County.

In the past, sites for community facilities, which are subject to the approval of local community boards, have been scuttled at a rate of 70 percent, according to the plan. "Getting enough sites into the pipeline, that's the key," noted Ms. Hoffman.

Ms. Hoffman asserted that community opposition has been fueled by in-

site selection. "There were a lot of people in the regional office of the Facilities Development Corp. looking for sites who didn't know what they were looking for," she said.

The plan provides for a number of changes inside the Facilities Development Corp. (FDC), the state agency charged with selecting and acquiring buildings.

On the staffing side, it proposes to hire about 25 real estate "specialists" who would devote their time to the metropolitan placement project alone. In addition, four "swat" teams composed of 10 staff members each would be assigned to the boroughs, with Queens and Staten Island combined.

The plan goes on to suggest new options for leasing by the FDC. The thrust of these technical innovations is to allow FDC the unprecedented capability to steer properties for sale into the hands of surrogate landlords who, having purchased and rehabilitated the buildings, would then lease them to the state.

Ms. Hoffman explained that outright purchase of property by the state proceeds at a snail's pace due to bureaucratic red tape. State requirements for competitive bidding on construction and rehabilitation, she said, further delay site implementation. An independent landlord, she suggested, might be able to circumvent such restrictions.

But the "biggest reason" for surrogate landlords, according to Ms. Hoffman, is to avoid the loss of a building from the tax rolls which occurs when property is appropriated by the state.

"Philosophically and practically we're out there saying the mentally retarded belong in the community and that they can contribute," Ms. Hoffman said. "Then the first thing you do is buy a house they can live in and take it off the tax roll."

In addition to the facilities slated for development in each borough under the direct auspices of the state, some 170 three-bed apartments are slated for development in the metropolitan area by United Cerebral Palsy, a voluntary agency, which now cares for 537 Staten Island Developmental Center residents, in conjunction with the Department of Mental Retardation. These apartments will be subject to the same FDC procedures as the state-generated facilities.

In Staten Island, the plan projects that 20 community facilities will be in operation by April 1981. At present, the Island has four such facilities, all located in the Community Board 1 area. Hoffman said that future placement efforts would be concentrated in Community Boards 2 and 3.

The state's plan does not address the ultimate fate of 776 former residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center

who, it projects, will be left in other borough developmental centers once the plan's terms have been met.

Ms. Hoffman, however, claimed that they, too, would finally be afforded the opportunity to live in a community setting. "You've got to bite off as much as you think you can chew right now," she said. "Nobody's saying these people have to stay in those institutions."

The review panel since 1975 has been conducting semi-annual audits of state compliance with the Willowbrook Consent Decree. According to the plan, OMRDD is negotiating an alternative form of supervision. Under its proposal, the state Health Department's Division of Quality Assurance would assume the function of surveyor.

Pg. 2 of 2 P15