

Our opinion

Review panel should have no secrets

The Willowbrook Review Panel's decision to bar the press and public from an official meeting held in Manhattan over the weekend is a disgrace that ought not to be tolerated.

The court-appointed panel is funded entirely with taxpayer money and its purpose is to monitor state compliance with patient care standards established by the federal government for the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook. At last Saturday's meeting, the panel discussed the state's plan to reduce the center's population to 250 persons by next year.

If that isn't important public business being conducted by a public body — the criteria for determining whether meetings should be open to the public — we don't know what it is.

Panel members attempted to justify their outrageous

geous closed-door meeting by contending the presence of reporters would inhibit their discussion on the state plan.

Those panelists so concerned about their privacy should think of whether their action at all serves the public's right to know. It clearly does not. And if the public can't avail itself of informed debate on the Willowbrook shutdown plan, how can state officials possibly expect the public to accept and understand the plan's provisions that hinge on public cooperation?

Responsible public officials should make tracks to the review panel with a stern warning that no more secret meetings will be tolerated. If another closed-door meeting is held, the panel surely will invite a legal challenge to its right to conduct public business in private.