

Mental retardation boss wants Island to accept more group homes

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ALBANY-- Defending state plans to virtually close the Staten Island Developmental Center by April 1981, state Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne said the retarded "deserve the earliest opportunity" to live in small community facilities.

Introne, in a far ranging interview with the Advance, said he hoped the Staten Island community would "open their hearts" to the retarded even though a state report released last week indicates the borough, on a per capita basis, has double the percentage of group homes than other boroughs. Most of the homes offer foster care or care for youths who have gotten into trouble with the law.

"I know it is unfortunate that Staten Island has become a place to establish group homes for other agencies," Introne said. "But my choices are limited to either placing Staten Island residents at Willowbrook into Island group homes or keeping them institutionalized."

The state plans to reduce the Staten Island Developmental Center's population from nearly 1,700 to 250 by 1981. Introne said all of the residents slated for transfer would be placed in their "home communities. About 100 residents are considered Island residents, either because they were born here or have relatives here, and will be placed in community facilities in the borough, he said.

Noting that most mental retardation professionals agree that the retarded are capable of more personal growth in small community-based facilities, Introne said, "I don't feel they should suffer because of what has been done at other times by other agencies."

Introne also repeated his earlier contention that the plan to speed placements out of the Willowbrook institution to conform with the requirements of a court decree is "doable," even though members of a court monitor and the commissioner's own staff have expressed serious doubts.

"What my plan is intended to do, is make up for the inadequacies of past

placement efforts," Introne said. "And I think we can do it."

But Introne said he is concerned that state lawmakers, under pressure to come up with an election year tax cut and to restore reductions proposed by the governor in aid to localities and school districts, may use their budget scissors on his budget for community programs. Major cuts in the governor's proposed \$743.7 million allocation to the agency, which includes a \$101 million increase for community-based programs, would seriously jeopardize the placement plan, he said.

The budget plan, which would trim the work force at Staten Island Developmental Center by more than 50 percent, "could be adjusted back to the institutions" if the placement plan falls short, Introne said.

"But what I'm concerned about, is that they may make cuts out of community placement and not make appropriate restitutions to the community side," Introne said.

Introne, who at 35 is the youngest state commissioner, also made the following observations during an interview at his Albany office.

¶ He said United Cerebral Palsy of New York State has agreed to place the 500 residents it cares for at the developmental center into the community programs by April 1981. The agency has asked for permission to operate an 8-bed unit at the institution for residents in need of short-term intensive care, but Introne said he will ask the agency to open the unit at another location.

He said the request was based on

complaints by union officials, representing employees at the center. The center's Civil Service Employees chapter has long opposed the presence UCP on the grounds of the institution and some union officials said that workers would not agree to voluntary transfers to other state centers until UCP moved out. UCP officials could not be reached for comment.

¶ There are "more than enough jobs" at other state developmental centers and group homes being opened by the state to ensure that there will be no layoffs of Willowbrook employees. In the past, directors of other developmental centers have refused to hire workers from the Island center. But Introne said the directors have been told that they won't be able to fill their positions, unless they hire the Willowbrook workers. "I don't think that is a problem anymore," he said.

¶ The governor's budget proposal will enable the agency to bring the state's upstate developmental centers up to staffing levels required at Willowbrook by the 1975 consent decree signed by Gov. Carey. But the budget, he said, does not include funds he requested for a pilot project to aid retarded and handicapped residents who live at home with their families and who have never been institutionalized.

¶ The commissioner is "disappointed" that key staff members of the agency's New York City regional office resigned in protest over his accelerated placement proposals for Willowbrook residents. But he said an excellent staff, under the direction of Michael Muscuri, "has picked up the slack."

¶ He is satisfied that most of the criticisms made in a scathing audit by the state comptroller's office of the financial management at the Staten Island Developmental Center have been addressed. "Elin Howe (the center's director) has just prepared a report showing that all of the recommendations of the comptroller's audit have been put into effect." The audit was released earlier this month.