

State mental boss insists he can meet court deadline

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — State Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne defended yesterday a state plan to virtually empty the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, by April 1981 after state lawmakers said the plan was destined for failure.

"The betting is 100-to-1 upstate that you can't get the community facilities you keep talking about," said Sen. Dale Volker, R-Depew.

But Introne, speaking at budget hearings sponsored by Senate and Assembly fiscal committees, said he is confident the state can comply with a consent judgment calling for the Willowbrook center's population to drop from 1,800 to 250 in the next 13 months. He said 40 Willowbrook residents were placed in community residences in the last 30 days.

"We wouldn't be budgeting for the program unless we could do it," Introne said.

Volker and other lawmakers charged, however, that Introne was overstating past placement successes, adding that the commissioner, appointed by Gov. Carey in August, was blindly following the dictates of a court decree.

The decree signed by Carey in 1975

mandates improved care for current and former residents of the developmental center, where "warehousing" of the retarded generated a national scandal.

Introne said he is ready to modify the placement plan if it becomes apparent that "quality placements" cannot be assured.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, chairwoman of the Assembly's Mental Health Committee, said she has yet to take a position on the placement plan.

"It seems odd, though, that the state is proposing something that is contrary to public opinion across the state," said Mrs. Connelly, noting the opposition to group homes and other community residences for the retarded.