

# Audit finds life at Willowbrook much better now

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ALBANY — Staten Island Developmental Center has made substantial progress toward complying with the requirements of a sweeping 1975 court judgment mandating improved care for the center's patients, according to a survey released yesterday by the state comptroller's office.

The report said that although there has been much improvement in patient care, changes are still needed in some areas to bring services to minimum levels required by the consent decree.

But in moving to comply with the decree, the audit said that the state had added too many employees to the Willowbrook institution and now employs 229 more workers than required.

The generally favorable audit is in contrast to a financial report released in January by Comptroller Edward V. Regan in which auditors said there was a "gross" lack of fiscal controls at the Island developmental center.

The latest audit, a follow-up to a 1976 comptroller's report on compliance with the 1975 court order mandating improved care for former and current developmental center residents, states that "much improvement is evident" in care provided at the Willowbrook institution as well as three other centers serving members of the so-called Willowbrook class. The other institutions surveyed were the Brooklyn, Manhattan and Bernard M. Fineson (Queens) Developmental Centers.

More than 5,000 former or current residents of the Island center, are mandated minimum levels of care by the de-

creed, signed by Gov. Carey after a suit by parents and others challenging the "warehousing" of the retarded at the Island center, formerly known as the Willowbrook State School.

Before the suit was filed in 1972, it was not uncommon to find 100 patients crowded into dirty, poorly ventilated rooms. Often one employee was responsible for the care of 30 patients.

Now, the audit said that staffing ratios required by the decree have been met and, in some cases, surpassed.

But staffing levels, which fell far short of the requirements of the consent decree in 1976, has improved to the point where some of the centers, particularly the Willowbrook institution, are overstaffed, the report said.

"Comparison with six other large centers show gross inconsistencies in staffing ratios; 2.05 to 1 at Staten Island against a range of .95 to 1.37 to 1," the audit said.

The report, which finds improvement in patient living conditions since the previous comptroller's audit in 1976, surveyed some buildings and wards at the four centers. There is no indication, however, which buildings were surveyed.

Parents of Staten Island Developmental Center patients say there is a major difference in the quality of care provided at individual living units, with care at some rated very good and at others quite poor.

Here is a sampling of the auditors' findings:

Record-keeping at the four centers improved since the 1976 audit, but 22 of 180 records sampled lacked treatment

plans required by the consent decree. Staten Island's records need the most improvement. State officials agreed with the audit findings, but said improvements have been made since the comptroller's survey in March.

Full compliance with needed environmental improvements at the center has yet to be reached, especially at the Island center. Surveyors said they found many ward bathrooms, although clean, lacked soap and towels. One-third of the 122 wards surveyed at the four centers lacked private toilets required by the consent decree. State officials said many residents have individual "hygiene kits," which include their own towels and soap. And, they added, many times residents tear down curtains surrounding toilets.

Community placements continued to lag behind levels needed to meet the consent decree requirement that the Island center be virtually closed by 1981. In some instances, the audit said, the fault did not lie with state placement officials, but rather with opposition from community groups opposing the opening of group homes in their neighborhoods. Mental Retardation Commissioner James Introne, despite skepticism by many, including some of his own staff members who resigned in protest, has developed a new plan he says will enable the state to reduce the center's population to 250 by or shortly after the April 1981 deadline set by the decree.

Elin Howe, director of the Island developmental center, said she was

pleased that the audit recognized that there have been improvements in patient care.

"I think we have made major improvements," said Ms. Howe, who was named director of the Willowbrook institution in 1978. "But I would be the last person to say we are perfect."

But Ms. Howe said she was disturbed by the audit's charge that the center is overstated. She said many employees are needed than required by consent decree staffing ratios to maintain mandated staffing levels when workers are absent or on lunch or coffee breaks.

In addition, she said, some residents need more staffing than required by the consent decree because of their handicaps.

Felton King, president of the Staten Island Developmental Center Chapter of the Civil Service Employees Association said, "There may be enough staffing on paper, but I'm telling you that in many buildings we are seven to nine employees short each shift because employees are out on medical disability."

But Ms. Howe and Introne, conceded that as the center's resident population declines as a result of the state's deinstitutionalization effort, the work force will have to be reduced. The consent decree requires that the center's population, now about 1,650, be reduced to 250.

Introne said employees would not be laid off, but would be offered jobs at other developmental center and at community residences being set up throughout the city.