

Reduction of beds at Willowbrook to cause shortage of places for retarded — official

BY BRUCE ALPERT
Of our Albany Bureau

ALBANY - State Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne told lawmakers yesterday that New York City faces a shortage of beds for the retarded as a result of a court decree requiring the state to reduce Staten Island Developmental Center's population to 250 by April 1981.

But Introne, testifying at a joint hearing of the Senate and Assembly mental health committees, said that he will continue to place residents of the Willowbrook institution into community facilities "because it is in the best interests of the patients." He urged lawmakers to allocate the \$44 million he says he needs to open up new residential facilities for the retarded. It appeared yesterday, however, that his request would fall on deaf ears.

Much of the hearing, called by Senate Mental Health Committee Chairman Frank Padavan, R-Queens, dealt with the 1975 decree, which mandates specific programs for former and current developmental center patients.

Padavan, noting what he termed wide-

spread dissatisfaction with some of the decree's mandates, called on Introne to "show some backbone" and change those portions which the commissioner believes are "detrimental" rather than helpful to the retarded.

There are several sections of the massive list of "entitlements" contained in the decree that he would like to change, Introne conceded.

But Introne, tapped from the state budget office by Gov. Carey to run the \$743-million mental retardation system in August, said it is unlikely he would be able to convince the federal court—which monitors care for the retarded—to modify the decree.

"Our credibility has not been good with the federal government because we have not accomplished what we said we would," said Introne, noting that the agency has constantly lagged behind staffing requirements and community placement goals since the decree was signed by Carey in 1975. The decree set a lawsuit filed by parents of residents at the then Willowbrook State School who sought to change conditions at the institution. When the suit was filed in 1972, the institution housed more

than 5,000 patients, most of whom were warehoused in large impersonal wards with no programs and insufficient staff to even maintain basic standards of personal hygiene.

Introne, pressed by Padavan and other lawmakers, said he would like the flexibility to place profoundly retarded residents in 20- and 30-bed facilities, where "I think we can provide better care." The decree mandates that members of the so-called Willowbrook class be placed in facilities containing 10 beds or less.

The commissioner also said he favors keeping the Island developmental center open with a population "somewhat" in excess of 250, so that retarded patients in need of institutional care, on a temporary basis, could be accommodated.

During the hearing, Introne said he would be unable to complete an ambitious plan to speed placement from the Willowbrook center if the Legislature fails to provide the funds he requested to acquire community residences.

It appeared, however, that the Legislature would only appropriate about \$11 million of the \$44-million he requested. Lawmakers said they did not believe In-

trone could spend all the money he requested in the next fiscal year because of the time it takes to win approval for community facilities.

To a question by Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, Introne repeated earlier assurances that he will not allow direct-care staff at the Island developmental center to fall below court-mandated levels.

The governor's 1980-81 budget calls for a 50 percent reduction in the center's staff, with the excess staff to go to other developmental centers and state-run community residences. But Introne said he will not allow the cuts to take place, if, as most observers believe, his placement program falls short of its goal.

Introne wants to reduce the Island center's population from 1,700 to 250 by the April 1981 deadline set by the decree.

Introne did concede, in answering another question by Mrs. Connelly, that there is a shortage of physical therapists and physicians at the Willowbrook institution. He blamed the shortage on salaries that are "insufficient to attract people to the state system."