

Willowbrook panel runs up big bill for travel expenses

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Expense account records for members of the Willowbrook Review Panel and associated consultants indicate that a weighty proportion of the state's reimbursement for their services — in one individual's case, 42 percent — has been used to cover long-distance commuting to work by out-of-state residents.

Mental retardation commissioner James E. Introne said it is "the exception, rather than the rule" for the state to retain consultants who live outside its borders and incur exceptional travel expenses.

But in the case of the Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), the usual practice has been reversed for five persons who help monitor the state's compliance with a court-ordered policy of transferring mentally retarded residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, into community-based group homes.

Vouchers obtained by the Advance showing the monitors' expenses over the latest fiscal year, from April 1979 to March 1980, reveal no evidence of improper claims for reimbursement. But they highlight an issue raised by Albany lawmakers, who have questioned

whether appropriations for review panel activities since 1975 have been efficiently spent.

The out-of-state residents include four out of seven review panel members: David Rosen, deputy administrator in Michigan's Mental Health Department; Michael S. Lottman, based in Washington, D.C., as a member of the Mental Health Law Project; Linda L. Glenn, associate commissioner for mental retardation in Massachusetts, and the review panel's chairman, James D. Clements, director of the Georgia Retardation Center. Two periodic consultants also are interstate commuters: Dianne E. Smith of Dallas, Texas, and John W. Cooleage of Atlanta, Ga.

Ms. Smith's vouchers list the highest reimbursement rate of the lot — \$24,567.73 for 11½ days' work. Her expenses included a monthly \$650 for lodging, meals and transportation, and a \$150 per diem consultant fee.

Forty-two percent of her total reimbursement did not go toward work. Round-trip air fare alone, between Dallas and New York City, consumed \$311.

Since vouchers for the past fiscal year can be submitted to the state as late as

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the coming September, the expenses cited may not be complete.

Review panel members were appointed in Brooklyn federal court from candidates chosen by state officials and by parents and advocate groups of mentally retarded residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly the Willowbrook State School. The panel grew out of a 1975 court judgment in a case brought against the state to rectify conditions documented as inhumane at the Willowbrook institution.

Panel members meet monthly, receiving \$200 for every six hours of work and reimbursement for transportation, though not for meals or lodging.

While both Commissioner Introne and review panel members defend the qualifications of Ms. Smith and Cooleage to serve as consultants, their links to panel members go further than the Willowbrook case. Ms. Smith, formerly with the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals, had previously worked with the panel's executive director, Kathy A. Schwanager. And Cooleage, a physician, had previously worked with panel chairman Clements.

Such past connections, Mrs. Schwanager said, assured the panel of the two consultants' "astuteness."

Members of the state Legislature, however, have insisted that a panel and consultants culled from New York would be more appropriate. Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly of West Brighton and Queens Sen. Frank Padavan in particular have cited the outsiders as one reason for the Legislature's refusal last month to continue funding review panel activities, a refusal now

being challenged in court.

Panel vice chairman Murray B. Schneps concedes that New York may harbor the kind of expertise required by the panel. But he added:

"I'd be curious to review such a list of qualified people in New York. Where is it? The answers shouldn't be simply negative. You can't just say it's self-evident that it would be cheaper to get an expert from Brooklyn than from Brookline. What about the people who are shooting the BBs. Why don't they come up with positive alternatives?"

Schneps, a Manhattan lawyer, has not submitted unusually high vouchers, given his minimal travel expenses. In April 1979, however, he received reimbursement for a round-trip air ticket to Fort Lauderdale, where, he "vaguely recollect(s)," he was on vacation.

The state paid for his return to Manhattan to attend a regular review panel meeting. The meeting, he said, concerned several controversial issues that also had drawn top state mental retardation officials, who do not ordinarily join review panel sessions. Among the controversies discussed was community placement of residents of Manhattan's Flower-Fifth Ave. Hospital. Some residents of the hospital are eligible for placement in apartments operated by the Working Organization for Retarded Children, an agency founded by Schneps' wife, Vicki.

Schneps commented that his vacation had been scheduled months ahead of time, while the panel meeting had not.

Before the Legislature deleted it from the state budget, the panel operations appropriation for 1980-1981 amounted to \$342,300.