

# Mental Health commissioner raps Willowbrook Review Panel

The state's commissioner for mental retardation, James E. Introne, said yesterday that he believes the Willowbrook Review Panel, while composed of "intelligent and energetic" individuals, has ignored the realities underlying provision of care to the mentally retarded.

Introne suggested that the review panel has in some cases impeded state efforts to upgrade the lives of thousands of current and former retarded residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center. If the review panel were dismantled, he added, "Obviously that would make life easier for us."

In the past, the commissioner has avoided any assertion that his disagreements with the review panel are strong enough for him to favor the panel's elimination.

The seven court-appointed panel members and their full-time staff of nine have been in jeopardy since the Legislature deleted a \$342,300 appropriation for panel activities from the state's 1980-1981 budget. Gov. Carey has appealed a federal court decision ordering him to find other means to foot panel-related expenses. A decision on the ap-

peal is expected shortly.

Introne complained that the review panel has refused to acknowledge the fiscal constraints faced by his Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD). Rather than bending policy to fit available funds, he said, the panel has stonewalled in the expectation of forcing the release of more money, robbing the mentally retarded of feasible improvements in their care in the meantime.

"They don't realize that this is a world of finite resources, not infinite resources," he said. "We have a fundamental difference there."

The commissioner cited two examples of panel decisions he considered detrimental to the interests of the mentally disabled population.

In one instance, two years ago, the state had intended to transfer Staten Island Developmental Center residents to the Bronx Developmental Center, considered to provide a more congenial environment. The panel blocked the move, arguing that no institution is a substi-

tute for community-based group homes and that the Bronx center was therefore not an appropriate alternative.

In the second instance, the state sought to establish 10- to 14-bed group homes for the retarded, while the panel advocated three-bed apartments. A compromise was reached, allowing three to six-bed facilities.

"The programmatic benefits gained from smaller facilities are consuming funds at such a rate that the opportunity for those benefits is being taken away from other people," Introne said.

"We are competing with other state agencies," he continued, "and we are trying to use the resources available to us for the maximum benefit of all the clients."

The panel, established under a 1975 federal court judgement, is responsible for monitoring the state's court-ordered progress toward placing all but 250 residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, into group homes by May 1981.

— ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS