

# Employees protest proposed closing of Westchester center for retarded

Special to the Advance

VALHALLA, N.Y. — A Westchester center for the retarded is slated for closing next month over protests of center employees and in apparent defiance of federal regulations.

The Mental Retardation Institute (MRI), which serves 6,000 retarded citizens, including an estimated 12 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents, is scheduled to close its in-patient and outpatient programs Sept. 1.

The center, run by New York Medical College, is being closed to eliminate a financial drain on the school and provide more "efficient"

services to the retarded, according to college spokesman Hank McManus.

But employees maintain the closing, approved by state Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne, will result in a loss of important services to retarded residents living in Westchester, Putnam and Rockland Counties. Some of the residents are living in group homes in the suburban counties after years of institutional care at the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

In addition to a 24-bed inpatient unit, the center also offers diagnostic services in speech, hearing and other skills as well as a host of other services.

Introne said that some of the services would be transferred to Flower Hospital in Manhattan, while others will be assumed by private agencies in Westchester. He said a plan was now being formulated to ensure a continuity of service.

But Betty Green, a member of the institute's clinical communicology department, charged that the closing of MRI "without formulation of any contingency plans is the mark of a thorough lack of humanity."

Federal officials, meanwhile, are looking at the covenants covering a \$3-million federal grant that subsidized construction of the MRI building, located here.

The grant states that the building, which opened in 1972, is required to provide mental health services for at least 20 years. That would seem to rule out the use of the building for administrative offices and classrooms as planned by New York Medical College.

"The college seems to think that they can simply do what they want and tell us about it later," said one federal official who complained that his agency was told only weeks ago that there were no imminent plans to close the institute. "They may be in for a surprise," the official added.

Federal officials said they might impose financial sanctions against the college in an effort to block the closing.

Center employees lay much of the blame for the planned closing to Introne and the state office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities officials. The state, the employees charged, simply refused to consider an adequate funding base to allow the program to continue.

But Introne, in an interview, said his agency could not provide the funds demanded by New York Medical College to keep the center open.

The commissioner said his agency is formulating a plan to ensure a continuation of care for residents served by the institute.