

Plan to close center for retarded postponed

By THOMAS CHECCHI
Advance Staff Writer

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. — In the wake of sharp criticism and adamant protests by representatives of parents and agencies that serve the retarded, the New York Medical College will suspend for at least two months a plan to close the college's Mental Retardation Institute (MRI), a college official announced yesterday.

Representatives of parent groups, MRI staff members, and concerned politicians met with college and Westchester County's mental health officials in the offices of the Westchester Association for Retarded Children to hammer out the compromise agreement.

The institute, located at the New York Medical College on the Grasslands Reservation in Valhalla, N.Y., serves 6,000 mentally retarded individuals, including about 12 former Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, residents. It is the only such facility in the seven-county area that serves mentally disabled persons routinely denied treatment at conventional hospitals.

After reporting a more than \$1-million deficit in running MRI, Vincent Restivo, director of the institute, said earlier this month that the program would close Sept. 1 and be transferred to Flower Hospital in Manhattan.

At the meeting, called by state Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne, John Cassidy, the college's chief financial officer, said, "The board of trustees and administration of the college have demonstrated a 30-year commitment to provide service to the retarded and developmentally disabled."

Pointing out that the college was among the first medical colleges in the country to get a federal university-affiliated grant to provide service to the developmentally disabled, Cassidy said, "We will not just walk away from a 30-year commitment."

While the college recently announced that it could no longer subsidize MRI, the meeting, conducted as a means to clarify the college's further involvement with MRI and the future of the institution, resulted in the formation of a select task force to assist MRI in developing plans to make its operation feasible.

The postponement was granted on the condition that two-thirds of the institute's operations are moved and \$1 million in additional funds are found.

"We are encouraged by the results of yesterday's meeting," said Betty Green, an MRI employee and a member of its ad hoc committee, "But we feel that we have just won a skirmish and that the battle must still go on."

While Mrs. Green was "guardedly optimistic" concerning the task force's potential to arrive at a solution, she explained that the MRI staff,

parents and representatives of agencies that serve the retarded feel that independent investigations of the college's finances are called for.

"Unbiased probes of the college's financial records are essential," she commented, "The (New York Medical College's) so-called deficit, we believe, is based on inaccurate and misleading figures."

But with the postponement of the transfer, she said, "at least we now have some breathing space to continue the fight to keep the institute open and the services available here. And I am hopeful," Mrs. Green continued, "that the task force can come up with a way to make it work."

One MRI employee, however, voiced skepticism concerning the motivation for the postponement and the creation of the task force. "They just backed down because of community and political pressure," the worker said. "When all this is over, I expect that nothing will be changed. They're waiting for the pressure to die down."

Commenting on the postponement, Eugene Aronowitz, Westchester County's mental health commissioner, said the county determined the September closing date would not have allowed enough time to find alternative means of treating the retarded.

Introne, who had supported the transfer plan, said yesterday that the meeting yielded "fine results" and that the postponement allows a "good opportunity for a broader decision-making process."

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