

The new legislative session that opens in Albany on Jan. 4 promises, alas, to have more impact on the lives of almost half a million retarded and developmentally disabled citizens than any other since the Willowbrook consent decree.

Handed down in 1975 by a Federal court, the decree mandated community integration of the retarded and resulted from public outrage over conditions at state institutions.

Despite the improved quality of life in community settings, the talk heard in the halls of the Legislature, in political clubs' back rooms, and in campaign headquarters of all parties, is of a return to the institution, to the custodial care and warehousing that was a way of life for the retarded until recently. Faced with re-election, legislators have been forced to listen and re-

The Politics Of Cruelty

By Robert Schonhorn

spond to voices of bigotry and screams of intolerance rather than to quiet reason, voices that have confused the retarded and persons who have multiple handicaps with mental patients and addicts released on city streets.

For years, the case for the disabled was presented with patient rationality and was led by a group of understanding lawmakers. Monies were appropriated, enabling bills were cleared, and thousands of children and adults were moved from prison-like confines of institutions into a new world of hope called community placement.

Private, nonprofit agencies took the lead in bringing the retarded out of the care of New York State and into a new way of life filled with hope. Now the pendulum may be swinging backward, with renewed pressure to return these citizens to the dark holes from which they were rescued only a short time ago. Bills now in the Legislature seem designed to do only one thing: halt the move toward community residences in response to the clamor from the uninformed and heartless.

The placement of the formerly institutionalized retarded into residential settings has resulted in a series of positive changes in their quality of life as well as changes in cost efficiency and administrative control.

In addition to improvements in their ability to move and communicate, intellectual, cognitive, and, most important, social changes have also been noted. Further, these advances have been brought about partly because those in charge are experienced, qualified, mental-health professionals.

The first residents moved from state institutions into apartments in the five boroughs in 1975. Those who joined the program this year have far different disabilities and potentials, making a single model for the deinstitutionalization process inappropriate.

It is important for the legislators, as well as their constituents, to understand that programs are constantly being evaluated, changed, and improved, with the result that during the last six years at least three options have been initiated in the New York metropolitan area:

- A 50-bed intermediate-care facility that houses residents in a single building.

This type of center is used to provide individuals with transient and transitional placement so that they can attain a level of functioning high enough to make community placement possible.

- A post-institutional placement program designed to serve residents who require a totally supervised environment to sustain community placement.

The program is based on the concept that apartment life, under careful supervision with appropriate individualized programming, can create a way of life that allows residents to reach their maximum potential.

- A three-level opportunity program.

These involve residences that provide transitional opportunities in progressively less-restrictive environments. The residents move from highly structured and supervised residences to group care with reduced staff, and then to apartments with an independent style of life for those whose developmental progress has been confirmed and measured. Although each model is unique, all are based on the premise that for many persons with multiple handicaps, the deinstitutionalization process is a giant step toward reaching their

potential, a crucial goal for every human.

The Legislature must be made aware that the deinstitutionalization process is complex, and that a return to the "warehouse" will not serve the best interests of the retarded or their families. Alternatives to community placements do work.

The challenge to the candidates today, and to lawmakers in Albany tomorrow, is to meet the needs of both the community and the retarded with creative programs, not renewed restrictions.

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