

New director is named for developmental center

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A new director has been selected to head the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, an institution that for the past five years has been the problem-ridden testing ground for the state's mental retardation policy.

James E. Introne, state commissioner for mental retardation, said yesterday that he has appointed Ella Louise Adams Curry as the institution's director beginning Nov. 10. Mrs. Curry currently is chief of mental health services for the state Department of Correctional Services.

She will replace the institution's director of three years, Elin M. Howe, who will assume an associate commissioner's post in the state Office for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

Mrs. Curry faces the task of controlling an institution that is, in Introne's words, undergoing "tremendous transition."

A 1975 federal court decree made the Willowbrook institution the model for the state's policy of transferring the mentally retarded from institutions into small community-based facilities.

But the process of drastically reducing the institution's operations has repeatedly erupted in labor unrest. Union leaders have charged the institution with understaffing and with discriminating against black and Hispanic workers, who constitute about 75 percent of the 2,800 employees.

Introne said, however, that the appointment of Mrs. Curry, who is black, is not intended as a gesture to defuse the racial issue. "How she operates obviously has an impact," he said, "but I'm not sure the appointment per se is going to change the nature of labor-management relations."

Felton King, the union leader for 2,400 workers at the institution, said yesterday: "I don't care whether she's black or white, it's not going to make her qualified."

King, president of Local 429 of the Civil Service Employees Associa-

tion (CSEA), filed a \$1-million lawsuit in Brooklyn Federal Court in September, charging the state with, among other things, racial discrimination at the developmental center.

"I hope this appointment is not what you might call a whitewash on the part of Commissioner Introne to try to appease this suit we brought," King said. "I hope the new director will sit in with some of my staff so we can educate her on some of the do's and don'ts and on some of the concerns of the employees at Staten Island."

Mrs. Curry could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Her job, at a starting salary of \$48,645 a year, entails responsibility for about 1,060 mentally retarded residents and the employees of the developmental center.

Mrs. Curry, 44, holds a nursing degree and a doctorate degree in mental health administration. She accumulated most of her administrative experience in Ohio, where she served during a four-year period as the director of two state mental health centers. In April 1979 she accepted a position in the New York state system as associate director of the Bronx Psychiatric Center. She moved to the Correction Department in September of this year.

Corrections Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin, a former commissioner of mental health and mental retardation for New York state, said yesterday of the Staten Island

job: "I told (Mrs. Curry) it is a real challenge. If you can run this place you should be able to run any place in the world."

Introne said: "Checkouts on her indicate that she's a very strong-willed, hard-working woman with good skills in relating to people."

Miss Howe said: "I'm just trying to offer her a lot of support, because I think she is going to be needing it. I guess I've been here during some of the best and some of the worst moments. I feel we have made substantial impact in improving the care for the residents."

Miss Howe said the state's goal of phasing the institution down to 250 residents has created "a very tough atmosphere."

"Employees know there may not be jobs for them here in the future," she said.

Miss Howe has been named associate commissioner for southeastern county services of the Office for Mental Retardation. Based in Albany, she will supervise community placement of the mentally retarded from five upstate institutions.

Introne described her move as "a reasonable progression." He said she had made plain during the summer her desire to leave the Staten Island Developmental Center. "There is a relatively short lifespan for directors at this particular facility," he said.