

Lawyer says center still a snakepit

Unseasonal clothing, grimy walls and inadequate supervision, among other deficiencies, plague whole wards of mentally retarded residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center, a civil rights lawyer said after touring the Willowbrook institution at Christmastime.

"It always gets my juices flowing to go out there. Everything I saw was consistent with what parents have been telling me and staff have been telling me," Christopher Hansen, an attorney with the New York Civil Liberties Union, said.

Hansen said he walked through portions of the 342-acre facility Dec. 19 because he wanted to check personally complaints of substandard living conditions there.

The state has spent eight years and hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars trying to improve conditions at the institution, forced by a federal court judge's finding that the constitutional rights of the residents had been violated.

Although the institution's population has declined from more than 6,000 mentally retarded residents a decade ago to fewer than 1,000 now, Hansen said he still was struck by the lack of basic amenities.

The deficiencies he noticed were:

☐ Many residents left without supervision on three different wards. "On each of these occasions," after Hansen entered the ward, "staff came running out of back rooms and offices," he said.

☐ Residents who were partially or inappropriately clothed for the weather.

☐ Residents spending less time in structured activity than scheduled.

☐ Wards that smelled foul, that were dirty, and that were barren of decoration.

☐ An often frustrated and demora-

lized staff.

Hansen said all these deficiencies were violations of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a plan for improvement of the institution ordered in Brooklyn Federal Court in 1975. The decree stemmed from a class action suit brought by the Civil Liberties Union, parents and other activist groups on behalf of the institution's residents in 1972.

Hansen said he may seek remedies for the violations he found by returning to court. "I've tried to intervene as little as possible, leaving it largely up to the professionals,"

he said. "But now I feel it's up to the lawyers."

In response to Hansen's criticism, James E. Introne, the state's commissioner for mental retardation, suggested that some problems at the Staten Island Developmental Center are inherent, defying reform.

"A number of problems are beyond the power of the court to remedy and so far beyond our ability to correct," Introne said. "These are problems that are not associated with the commitment of resources."

One such problem, he said, is "uncertainty in the labor pool," as the institution's population is reduced to meet a court-mandated goal of 250 mentally retarded residents and equivalently fewer staff.

Another problem, he said, "is in being associated with a program known statewide or nationwide as something that was bad."

The commissioner added, however, that his own eyewitness view of the developmental center would "cast in a more positive light" what Hansen "obviously casts in a more negative light."