

Of promises forgotten

By Bruce Frankel
Staff Writer

In 1972 a curled, naked body flickering on television screens aroused the public to the grotesque living conditions of 5,000 mentally retarded residents at Willowbrook on Staten Island.

Today, the environment at Willowbrook remains one reason many people question the state's commitment to the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree.

Some of those concerned have scheduled an all-day conference to discuss Willowbrook and other mental health issues Feb. 7 at Pace Law School in White Plains. It is being sponsored by the Westchester chapter of the New York Civil Liberties Union.

More than five years ago, shortly after taking office, Gov. Hugh Carey fulfilled a 1974 campaign pledge to tour Willowbrook. What he saw included a man tied spread-eagle to a bed covered with flies. Carey was shocked.

He instructed his staff to negotiate an agreement with lawyers then suing the state for depriving Willowbrook residents protection from harm.

The Willowbrook Consent Decree promised dramatic improvements and resettlement by March 31, 1981 of all but 250 of its residents. The court mandate also compelled the state to move most of the residents into group homes where they could live decently and with minimum confinement.

The March 31 deadline will not be met.

Despite a reduction to about 1,000 residents, important improvements in its medical services and the expenditure of more tax dollars on Willowbrook than on any similar state institution, a recent tour there showed conditions for most of its residents remain deplorable.

— Locked, bare dayrooms reek with the odors of neglect while more than 25 mentally retarded people mill about, squat on floors, rock against the walls, or

Willowbrook — where life's still deplorable for mentally retarded

sit on scattered plastic chairs.

— Except for a few closets, only beds fill vast dormitories. The consent decree called for decorations, but there are none. There are no wall dividers providing privacy.

— Cold ground water cascades down a wall in at least one communal bathroom because capital improvements are not considered wise in buildings that will eventually be phased out.

— Inadequate space and the lack of sufficient and up-to-date materials prevent recreational therapists from properly working with multiply handicapped residents.

— Only spoons are used to shovel food from styrofoam containers during dinner. A supervisor said the lack of sufficient staff made the use of forks and knives too dangerous. He also said the dishwasher was broken.

Dr. James Clements is an Atlanta doctor and a member of the seven-member Willowbrook Review Panel of experts monitoring the state's compliance with the consent decree. But the review panel has been all but defunct since the state Legislature took away its funding last April.

"As long as the public continues to view the mentally retarded as children of a lesser god, they will remain political pawns," said Clements.

For these reasons, in addition to charges that Willowbrook's staffing remains inadequate, attorneys for the New York Civil Liberties Union are preparing to return to court to seek a contempt order against the state.

Some members of the Legislature, parents of the

mentally retarded and agencies that operate group homes are seeking a re-examination of the state's commitment to the consent decree and to the rights of the mentally retarded.

A growing body of state officials, including those who run Willowbrook, say the 1975 consent decree was ill-conceived, is inflexible and should be scrapped and renegotiated.

Nearly all state officials, legislators and others familiar with Willowbrook — exposed on television by Geraldo Rivera in 1972 and called "a snakepit" in 1965 by Robert Kennedy — believe that strides have been made toward ameliorating the conditions which brought about the original lawsuit.

They are quick to note that wards formerly held as many as 70 people who frequently were shackled, unclothed and uncared for. Feces are no longer found smeared on the walls, they say. There are now six hours of daily programs that take residents out of their buildings, and a group home was set up on campus six weeks ago to help some make the transition back to the community.

Those who defend Willowbrook's progress say much criticism doesn't take into account the effort to overcome an antiquated physical complex and the known trouble between employees and management at the institution.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, a Staten Island Democrat who chairs the Assembly's Mental Hygiene Committee, has an office in Willowbrook's administration building. She proposed the institution's change of name to Staten Island Developmental Center.

Connelly and others protest the unfairness of a current joke among professionals who care for the mentally retarded. After one professional visits the institution, a colleague asks him, "Was it any better?" "The name's changed," he answers.

"I think that's very unfair to some of these people who've worked so hard," Mrs. Connelly. "When I first went there, they still had people in padded cells right