

Union fights closing of Willowbrook

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

The statewide leader of the union representing professional employees at the Staten Island Developmental Center said yesterday that he is "totally opposed" to the projected closing of the institution, which currently houses more than 900 mentally retarded people.

John J. Kraemer, president of the New York State Public Employees Federation (PEF), AFL-CIO, said he intends to work through the state Legislature and the courts to preserve the developmental center in Willowbrook for at least 550 residents.

Kraemer traveled from Albany to meet with the union's membership at the institution yesterday. Nearly 400 of the facility's 3,000 employees belong to PEF. Most of the union's members are educators such as recreational, occupational and speech therapists.

The professional employees said they are resisting the institution's closing because they fear the loss of their jobs and of treatment programs they believe in.

But James E. Introne, the state commissioner for mental retardation and developmental disabilities, said yesterday when asked about the chances of retaining the massive institution: "My bias is toward smaller facilities."

"To make Willowbrook into a suitable facility for 500 people would require an investment of capital funds that is not currently anticipated," Introne said.

The commissioner conceded he cannot offer a guarantee that new jobs will be available as the Willowbrook institution is phased out. "I'm hopeful that we can avoid layoffs. It's certainly a danger," he said.

Introne said he has offered to meet with Kraemer and the union local's leadership.

The teachers accused the state of consistently transferring the institution's patients to inferior facilities. Some of the teachers said they were forced to move with the patients because the other facilities were understaffed.

"It's a beautiful prison," Charles Sutter, a recreational therapist, said of a unit of the Bernard Fine-son Developmental Center in Queens.

The unit, Howard Park, took 18 Staten Island patients in March. It is a four-story brick building flush with the Belt Parkway, which Sutter contrasted with the 234 acres of wooded land that constitute the Staten Island Developmental Center.

In addition, three teachers were involuntarily transferred to Howard Park, according to Dr. Ella Curry, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Victor Bellini, one of the teachers shifted against his will to Howard Park, said he was upset at being separated from the greenhouse project that he helped operate at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

The greenhouse, which allows about 20 mentally retarded patients to grow flowers and vegetables, is one of the programs Bellini said made the Willowbrook institution unusual and worthwhile.

"My main concern is not that they sent me over here," Bellini said in an interview from Howard Park, "but that I like my old job and I like my clients."

Kraemer, the PEF president, said the state was "playing a numbers game" — transferring patients without regard for their welfare — in its rush to shut down the developmental center.

The Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed in 1975 in Brooklyn Federal Court, directs the state to reduce the developmental center's population to no more than 250 by the end of this month. Proven unrealistic, the deadline is being extended to permit a population of 500 until 1982.

"Over the long term, it is not our plan to settle at 500," Introne said.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, said, however, she agrees with the PEF employees that the institution's population should stabilize near 500.

Mrs. Connelly said she is proposing legislation to fund court-appointed monitors of the developmental center. In exchange for the monitors, she said, she expects the court to modify the consent decree and sanction a larger institution.