
The Editorial Notebook

The Willowbrook Watchers

Several years ago the Willowbrook Development Center, a New York State institution for the retarded on Staten Island, became a national symbol of social neglect. A Federal judge found conditions so inhumane as to violate the constitutional rights of patients and ordered the state to clean up.

In time, the conditions imposed by the court, which included a review panel to monitor the plan, became a model for reform. Several states adopted it. The panel not only kept the court informed; its seven members, experienced professionals in the care of the retarded, showed state officials how best to fulfill the court's objectives. Paramount among these was the difficult task of placing 6,000 retarded residents in new group homes around the state.

Last year, however, the panel folded when the Legislature refused to fund it. Some lawmakers said it wasn't doing anything significant and objected to the fact that it included members from other states. But they were also surely responding to vociferous constit-

uent complaints about retarded patients moving into their neighborhoods.

After the dissolution of the panel, the program of putting Willowbrook patients into community homes slowed down. In 1978 and 1979, with the help of the panel, some 400 patients were so placed. Last year, without the panel, the number fell to about 300. And an audit conducted by the state last fall found that minimum standards of sanitation and privacy were being ignored at Willowbrook. New York's abandonment of the watchdog group also threatens to influence practice in other states that looked to New York as a model.

This year the panel has another chance. The Assembly proposes to put \$340,000 for a smaller group, composed only of New Yorkers, into the budget. While the bill faces serious opposition in the Senate, it has the support of Governor Carey, along with the members of the Assembly. They take seriously the responsibility to keep Willowbrook cleaned up, and understand that an effective watchdog panel is essential.