

Letter: On Care of the Retarded

No Need for the Willowbrook Panel

To the Editor:

Despite The Times's longstanding obsession with it, the continued funding of the Willowbrook Review Panel would pose a serious obstacle to quality care for the mentally retarded (editorial April 29).

Judge Bartels and his group of advisers may be portrayed in the media as a "model of reform," but United Cerebral Palsy of New York City has instead stated that the Review Panel "lacks program sense and cost-effectiveness." What better way to describe the panel's quota system, a ritual so narrow-mindedly legalistic that it has resulted, for example, in non-ambulatory severely retarded clients being placed in high-rise city apartments?

This tortured interpretation of a "least restrictive environment" may fulfill the language of a court order, but it is both clinically unwise and counter-

productive. This is precisely why the perpetuation of the panel's absolutist stand would be, in the words of Joseph Weingold, retired executive director of the Association for Retarded Children, "not only to the detriment of the Willowbrook Class, but also to those institutionally retarded."

The recent slowdown in the community placement of Willowbrook clients is not the result of the panel's defunding; it rather reflects the sad fact that, after a half-decade of deinstitutionalization policy, the clients still in residence are those whose handicaps make them most difficult to discharge.

Further, the Review Panel is a legal creation stemming from a class-action suit and its benefits affect only Willowbrook clients. State mental hygiene administrators, by contrast, must be concerned with creating a balanced system of rational community place-

ment and improved institutional care. From this perspective, your statistics are invidious. Statewide, placements of the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled into community settings continue apace.

In 1975, I authored this state's site selection law, designed to create group homes in community-approved settings that include balanced programs of education, therapy and rehabilitation. So it would be most disingenuous to interpret my opposition to the panel as being motivated by a politically convenient antipathy to community placement. It is simply that, in light of the record and the recent Pennhurst Decision of the Supreme Court, I find no compelling argument for the Review Panel's continued existence.

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Chmn., Committee on Mental Hygiene
Albany, May 1, 1981