

# UCP: One bloated bureaucracy born from another's reform

in Willowbrook. The organization has become the biggest private operator of housing for the retarded in New York City, and the second-largest in the state.

Although many observers — including James E. Introne, the state's commissioner of mental retardation — agree United Cerebral Palsy has done a better job than the state, the agency's rapid and ambitious growth has proved hard to monitor and has led to charges of fiscal mismanagement and abuses of patient rights.

During a two-month investigation of United Cerebral Palsy, the Advance interviewed scores of employees and reviewed sheaves of internal documents. Questionable practices surfaced including purchases from the agency's board of directors, misuse of patient funds and violations of regulations governing medical treatment and the reporting of a patient's death.

Robert Schonhorn, the executive director of United Cerebral Palsy, denied any deliberate wrongdoing. He said he was "bothered" by apparent irregularities in the use of patient funds, but he defended dealings with the board of directors and called state medical regulations impractical.

Private agencies like United Cerebral Palsy rose to power in 1975 when Gov. Carey signed the Willowbrook Consent Decree in Brooklyn Federal Court, vowing to clean up the Willowbrook State School, now named the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Once denounced as a "snakepit" by the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, "Willowbrook" housed more than 5,000 mentally retarded people in the early 1970s. Parents and the New York Civil Liberties Union sought reform of the squalor and overcrowding by suing the state.

The consent decree settled the lawsuit, and the state asked private agencies to help scale down all its large, impersonal institutions and place the mentally retarded in community-based apartments.

United Cerebral Palsy became the state's closest ally in reforming Willowbrook, but critics say the agency assumed too much responsibility too fast, generating its own bloated bureaucracy with minimal accountability to state officials, parents of the mentally retarded and outsiders.

United Cerebral Palsy was founded 35 years ago by a coalition of parents with brain-damaged children. For nearly three decades, it depended on thousands of dollars in private donations. The agency still is, for example, a favorite charity of the Elks lodges, a fraternal society, whose money subsidizes station wagons used by traveling therapists.

But as a result of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, United Cerebral Palsy started operating residential facilities. Infusions of taxpayer dollars have allowed it to manage three institutions and 107 apartments for a total of 986 mentally retarded people throughout the state.

The agency spent a \$31-million budget in 1979, according to the latest data filed with the Department of State. Private donations amounted to less than 2 percent of the total. Medicaid supplied 86 percent, and other government grants made up the rest.

Schonhorn, as the agency's top officer, will collect a \$65,000 salary this year. The state's commissioner of mental retardation earns \$400 less, while overseeing a \$773-million budget, serving a mentally retarded population of nearly 40,000.

Despite growth into a major government contractor, Schonhorn contends the agency has preserved its original identity as "an advocate, somebody who makes known to people what their rights are, who protects and assists them."

United Cerebral Palsy's first residential facility was the Nina Eaton Center in Ocean Breeze, a 50-bed unit opened in 1975 to accommodate severely and profoundly retarded people transferred out of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

When the agency took over a fragment of the 264-acre Willowbrook institution in 1977, it renamed those buildings the Karl D. Warner Center, which currently houses 450 people.

Just last year, the agency became the administrator of Castle Hill, a 60-bed facility in the Bronx. United Cerebral Palsy has set up 3- and 10-bed apartments in the five boroughs housing 327 people, and apartments elsewhere in the state for 99 more.

United Cerebral Palsy and the Association for Retarded Children provide the bulk of privately operated housing for the retarded in New York State, dwarfing the other agencies.

Although the agency's administrative headquarters are located on Manhattan's east side, its physical plant is concentrated on Staten Island. Since its involvement in residential care, the agency has branched into a variety of supporting ventures.

From Staten Island, it operates and disperses the services of its own clothing store, an 86-vehicle transportation department, and a 16-man building repair and maintenance crew. In January, the agency leased a warehouse in Newark, N.J.

Walter Rosenthal, the agency's public relations director, insisted United Cerebral Palsy had not actively pursued size, wealth and responsibility. He said the state's need for the agency — heightened by federal court pressure — was the determining factor.

"The state has the option, so to speak, to take their business elsewhere," Rosenthal said. "Remember the F15 fighter? Grumman and General Motors were the only ones invited to bid on it, because

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