

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE, Wednesday, June 17, 1981

# UCF's boutique: A service or a burden for handicapped?

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

In the Nina Eaton Boutique in Ocean Breeze, hundreds of polyester dresses, elastic-waist jeans, sneakers and shirts jam closets and spill out of boxes. Unlike boutiques in the Staten Island Mall, hospital smells of pureed food, urine and antiseptic slice the air.

But the 887 customers — mentally retarded people living in apartments and institutions throughout the five boroughs — are not permitted to buy clothing anywhere else.

The boutique is operated by United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, a private, non-profit agency that spends an annual budget of \$31 million in state and federal funds on care and housing of the mentally retarded.

Customers order in person or by catalogue from the store, located in a building leased from the South Beach Psychiatric Center, and the agency spends thousands of dollars a year dispatching its own vans to transport people and merchandise.

But employees of United Cerebral

Palsy say the boutique often fails to fulfill its avowed purpose of saving money and dressing the retarded clients according to their personal tastes, seasonably and in proper sizes.

Employees contend, and financial ledgers document, that in some cases the boutique has functioned as a cumbersome and unnecessary middleman, inflating costs. When buying shoes, for instance, patients are taken first to a retail shoe outlet for fitting. Their shoes are then shipped to the boutique, where they

are marked up 25 to 74 percent above retail prices, according to agency records.

Although the state earmarks an annual Medicaid grant of \$275 for the purchase of clothes by each patient, financial ledgers show thousands of dollars from the patients' personal funds were used to pay for garments. In the case of one patient, \$425.74 was withdrawn from his personal bank account in a four-month period to meet boutique bills.

In late February, after the cold season had almost passed, a United

Cerebral Palsy administrator instructed supervisors to order winter jackets for hundreds of patients, whether or not they already had one. The reason he gave was that the boutique had stocked too many coats, without assessing the need.

Robert Schonhorn, executive director and chief officer of United Cerebral Palsy, said all the boutique's profits — nearly \$54,000 last year — are recycled through the agency. He said it is the store's policy to charge no more than 22 per-

cent above cost for all items. Since 1975, United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State has grown from a small charitable organization whose budget was measured in thousands of dollars to a major government contractor caring for some of the more severely disabled people in New York state.

During a two-month investigation by the Advance, agency employees and parents of the mentally retarded have raised serious questions about United Cerebral Palsy's abili-