

# Hearings to probe UCP's treatment of mentally retarded

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly said yesterday that she has scheduled legislative hearings beginning Sept. 15 to explore allegations that United Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State has engaged in questionable practices, including the abuse of patient rights and the misuse of Medicaid funds.

Mrs. Connelly, D-West Brighton, who chairs the Assembly Mental Health Committee, said Sen. Frank Padavan, R-Queens, the chairman of the state Senate Mental Hygiene Committee, has agreed to join her in sponsoring the hearings.

United Cerebral Palsy, a charitable agency that spends a \$31-million annual budget under contract to the state to house and treat the mentally retarded, was the subject of a series of articles published in the Advance last month.

"I've heard for a long time that there are problems with UCP," Mrs. Connelly said, "but it is difficult for people to give something in writing. They want

you to investigate, but they are afraid to commit themselves.

She said the Advance series provided the raw material that would guide the legislative hearings. In addition, she said she expects to rely on the findings of state authorities who are currently probing the operations of United Cerebral Palsy.

The agency's finances are being reviewed by a commercial auditing firm hired by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. A separate investigation is being performed by the Commission on Quality of Care of the Mentally Disabled.

"I don't have the auditors at my disposal who can do the kind of job that the independent auditors can do," Mrs. Connelly explained. "Hopefully, they will be ready by that time."

One of the groups that has urged her to conduct hearings is the Board of Visitors of the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, the assemblywoman said.

She said the board had sent

The Advance series was based on interviews with scores of United Cerebral Palsy employees and parents of the mentally retarded, as well as the review of internal agency documents.

Questionable practices surfaced, including:

- ¶ Purchases from the agency's board of directors.

- ¶ The mismanagement of state and federal Medicaid funds, which supply 86 percent of the agency's budget, and of the patients' personal bank accounts.

- ¶ Violations of state regulations governing medical treatment and the reporting of a patient's death.

- ¶ A campaign of harassment, including the alleged confiscation of personal mail, waged against employees seeking to join a union.

Walter Rosenthal, a spokesman for United Cerebral Palsy, has responded to the six-part series of articles by saying the agency never violated any laws.

her a letter, dated July 6, expressing concern about United Cerebral Palsy's treatment of retarded patients and expenditure of government funds.

United Cerebral Palsy has inherited most of its nearly 1,000 mentally retarded patients from the state-run developmental center in Willowbrook. The state is under a federal court order to improve the care of Willowbrook patients and to transfer them into community-based group homes.

Mrs. Connelly said the legislative hearings probably would take place in Manhattan — in the State Office Building, at 270 Broadway, or in the World Trade Center.

"I would hesitate to come to Staten Island," she said. "It has been my experience that if you have hearings locally, people clam up and won't talk."

Mrs. Connelly said she planned to request testimony, using her power of subpoena if necessary, from United Cerebral Palsy officials and employees, as well as "anybody I think would be able to shed some light on what's going on."