

Our opinion

Answers needed on UCP

There are two sides to every story. That's a principle every reporter, and every newspaper, must constantly keep in mind in presenting news stories to readers.

But sometimes both sides of a story can't be presented as fully as one might like because organizations or individuals in a position to offer information refuse, for their own reasons, to cooperate with reporters.

Such was the case with the United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Associations of New York State, a taxpayer-subsidized organization that provides care for nearly 1,000 mentally disabled New Yorkers, many of them housed in facilities at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

A two-month investigation of UCP by the Advance raised some serious questions about the organization's respect for patients' rights, its compliance with various state regulations and its use of both patient and public funds. Those questions were reported in a six-part series published by the Advance last month.

Since the series appeared, some UCP officials and employees have been waging a not-so-subtle campaign to deny responsibility for wrongdoing by discrediting the Advance. Among other things, it has been said that the Advance presented stories that were one-sided and unfair to UCP because the organization had no chance to respond to the charges that appeared in print.

That simply is untrue. UCP executives were offered — on more than one occasion — opportunities to respond in detail to the questions raised in the course of the Advance investigation. And they were offered those opportunities *before* the series was printed.

But the UCP executives, for reasons known

only to them, declined those requests for detailed comment.

Now UCP executives have come up with a package of nine documents which, they say, absolves the organization of any suggestion of criminal wrongdoing. Copies of the documents were delivered to the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, as well as to several news organizations — the Daily News and United Press International.

But you won't be able to read details of UCP's response to the questions raised in the Advance series in the Advance because UCP Executive Director Robert Schonhorn issued explicit orders that the documents not be provided to this newspaper.

It appears as if UCP, while protesting innocence of any wrongdoing to a general audience, is afraid to have its claims of innocence subjected to scrutiny by the newspaper that first raised questions about the organization's operations. That's a cute little game for UCP to play, but it's one that denies taxpayers — who support UCP programs to the tune of millions of dollars annually — the sort of clear answers to which they're entitled.

Fortunately for taxpayers, as well as for those who depend on UCP for services, Senate and Assembly committees have agreed to thoroughly investigate the questions raised by the Advance. Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton, and her Senate counterpart, Frank Padavan, R-Queens, say they'll hold public hearings on UCP's performance and practices in September.

It's time UCP executives were made to answer questions directly, and under oath. Stonewalling of the sort that has occurred can no longer be tolerated.