

Changes urged in agency for mentally ill

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ALBANY — An 18-year-old agency that is supposed to serve as legal advocates for patients at state psychiatric and retardation centers is performing its job poorly and should be reorganized, a state watchdog panel said yesterday.

Clarence J. Sundram, chairman of the state Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled, testified yesterday at the agency, the Mental Health Information Service, will be to serve 43 percent of the pa-

tients admitted to state mental hospitals.

Among the institutions served by Information Service attorneys are the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, and the South Beach Psychiatric Center, Ocean Breeze. Attorneys at the Island institutions either refused to comment or were unavailable yesterday.

"There is a desperate need for legal advocacy for persons who are mentally disabled," Sundram told the Senate Mental Health Committee in his testi-

mony. "Equally evident is that need is simply not being met at present."

Sundram called on the Legislature to approve legislation that would reorganize the Mental Health Information Service into a single statewide entity under the Office of Court Administration and redefine its mission as exclusively a legal advocate for patients.

The service, which is currently broken into four components under the supervision of the state's four Appellate divisions,

now also serves as a source of information for the courts.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, who chairs the Assembly Mental Health Committee, said she agreed changes should be made in the Information Service, but added that keeping the system under court control

would limit legislative input into its operations.

"At least this way everyone will be dancing to the same tune," she said, alluding to charges the agency operates differently in different parts of the state. "But that tune won't be set by the Legislature."