

Our opinion

Make UCP answer now

It was just over seven months ago that the Advance, in a series of articles following a lengthy investigation, raised some serious questions about the United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Associations of New York State. UCP is the 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.

The questions raised in the Advance series involved UCP's respect for patients' rights, its compliance with various state regulations and its use of both patient and public funds.

UCP's response to those questions was odd, to say the least. Executives of the organization declined repeated invitations to comment when the series was being prepared. Then, several weeks after the series appeared, the executives released a package of documents which they claimed absolved the organization of any suggestion of wrongdoing; the documents were made available to a number of news organizations, though not to the Advance.

UCP, it seemed, wanted to assert its innocence without having its assertions scrutinized by the newspaper that first raised questions about the organization's operations.

But UCP has been scrutinized by a private auditing firm, retained by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. In a report released late last week, the auditor — Deloitte, Haskins & Sells — raised some of the same questions contained in the Advance series last year.

The auditors were hampered by missing pages from financial ledgers and by sloppy bookkeeping on UCP's part. But what they did find was sufficient to convince them that UCP is beset by "in-

ternal management problems" and collected, over a two-year period, about \$11 million in Medicaid funds for patient services that were never provided.

UCP apparently plans to appeal at least the conclusion on Medicaid overpayments.

But what's to become of the other findings of the audit report? Will the report simply be placed on a shelf to gather dust? Will UCP again be allowed to ignore significant questions that ought to be answered?

We certainly hope not. There are a number of items in the auditor's report — involving the maintenance of certain patient records, patients' rights and patients' personal funds — that bear further scrutiny. A thorough investigation by the Legislature's standing committees on mental health would provide exactly the scrutiny that's needed.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly of West Brighton, who chairs the Assembly's Mental Health Committee, should schedule hearings as soon as she can. She should call UCP executives to respond, under oath, to the questions raised first by the Advance articles and most recently by the auditing firm hired by the state.

UCP spends over \$30 million of the public's money each year. Taxpayers are entitled to assurances that the money is prudently spent, and everyone — but particularly public officials — should want to make certain that the disabled individuals in UCP's custody are receiving the best care possible.

The questions that have been lingering around UCP for months need to be answered. Mrs. Connelly, we hope, will take the initiative to make sure such answers are forthcoming.