

New money might save hundreds of jobs at Willowbrook

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Legislative leaders have decided to cut funds for community placement programs and instead increase allocations to Staten Island Developmental Center and other retardation centers, according to Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly.

The change is expected to save the jobs of several hundred employees at the Willowbrook center. Although some job losses undoubtedly will occur, the number should be less than the 1,119 employee staff reduction called for in Gov. Carey's budget proposal. There are currently about 2,500 employees at

the Island center.

Mrs. Connelly said it is impossible to say how many jobs will be saved, noting that legislative leaders have simply agreed to increase allocations to developmental centers by about \$50 million above that recommended by Carey. Distribution of the funds will be left to the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

The governor's \$26.7-billion budget proposal anticipated that all but 400 of the center's 750 residents would be transferred to community facilities in the next 12 months, a goal that may be unachievable with a \$23-million cut in group home allocations ex-

pected to be approved by the Senate and Assembly next week.

Mrs. Connelly said that the budget would allow community placement facilities already in the works to proceed, but block any new facilities from getting started.

The reduction in group home funds is expected to slow the placement of residents out of the Staten Island Developmental Center and other developmental centers into group homes, a deinstitutionalization program mandated by federal courts.

"I guess it (the reduction in group home funds) reflects the unpopularity of community

placement programs in some communities," Mrs. Connelly said.

Transfer of mentally retarded patients out of large institutions and into community facilities has long been recommended by mental retardation experts, who maintain that the retarded can best achieve their potential in a home-like setting.

Overall, Mrs. Connelly said negotiators for the Republican-led Senate and Democratic-controlled Assembly have agreed to reduce the governor's recommended appropriations for mental retardation programs from

\$847 million to \$822 million. Carey has said that he has already trimmed mental retardation budgets to the bone and that additional cuts would severely affect services.

Announcement of the agreement by legislative fiscal staffs came as Carey nominated Zygmund L. Slezak to be commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

Slezak has served as acting commissioner for the last nine months, since former commissioner James L. Introne left to become the governor's director

of State Operations.

"As acting commissioner of the state's second largest agency, Zygmund Slezak has been doing a first-rate job developing and implementing New York's comprehensive service system for the care and treatment of mentally retarded and developmentally disabled people," Carey said.

Slezak, whose nomination is subject to confirmation by the Senate, has a bachelor's degree from Siena College and a master's in psychiatric social work from the Boston College of Social Work. His salary will be \$69,200.