

Editorial page

Our opinion/

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Taxpayers have heard, time and time again, of cases in which individuals or groups have been accused of misusing public money, though little or nothing ever seems to be done to recover the cash.

It was a welcome relief, then, to learn that the state Legislature — at the insistence of Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth Connelly of West Brighton — has taken steps to collect about \$11 million owed to the state by a charitable agency.

A recent, independent audit confirmed earlier findings — reported as part of an Advance investigation last year — that United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) Associations of New York State improperly collected, and kept, \$11 million in state Medicaid funds during 1979 and 1980. UCP, which cares for about 450 retarded persons at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook, and hundreds more elsewhere in the state, obtained the Medicaid overpayments in connection with its work with the retarded.

UCP executives have consistently denied that any overcharging occurred. So far as the executives are concerned, there's no money to be paid back to the state because no overpayments were made to UCP.

That, however, does not square with the facts as established by the private accounting firm of Deloitte, Haskins & Sells, which was commissioned by the state to study UCP's finances. The

firm found that overcharging did occur, and concluded that UCP should return the \$11 million in question to the state.

Faced with UCP's intransigence, the Legislature has finally — and commendably — decided to fight fire with fire. Under a budget modification drawn up at Mrs. Connelly's request, UCP won't receive \$3.3 million in state operating subsidies unless and until it comes up with a plan to pay back the \$11 million.

We suspect it was more than a coincidence that, even as Mrs. Connelly's request was being written into the budget, UCP announced that it will have to pull out of several group homes it operates for the retarded on Staten Island because of financial problems.

While UCP may indeed be losing money on those group homes, the timing of its announcement certainly creates some suspicion that UCP is attempting to establish that it doesn't have any money with which to repay the state, should organization executives eventually concede that the \$11 million is owed.

For the moment, we urge Mrs. Connelly and other legislators to stick to the responsible course they've charted. If UCP can prove it didn't overcharge the state, it should offer all available evidence at once; UCP executives should be made to understand, however, that simple stonewalling on the overcharge question no longer will do.