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State Residences for Retarded Found Inferior and Expensive

By RONALD SMOTHERS

A state commission has concluded that state-run community residences for the retarded in New York City provide inferior care and are 50 percent more expensive than those run by voluntary agencies.

Clarence Sundram, chairman of the commission, said that state facilities suffered from the rapid change from a 100-year-old system of putting the retarded in institutions to a system of moving patients out into smaller homes under the pressure of a 1975 court order.

The state is not inherently incapable of running a good home," he said, "but they had to overcome 100 years of history with a gun at their heads. You take shortcuts and you can't build the philosophy of community residences under those conditions."

According to the two-year study, which focused on 14 voluntary and 10 state group homes in the city, the median cost of caring for residents in state-operated homes was \$43,093 per resident annually compared with a median cost of \$27,876 annually in those run by voluntary agencies. Even though the state facilities generally served more disabled residents and had more staff, the report said, they often provided fewer services for the money spent.

The 100-page study by the state's Commission on the Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled also said that the placing of some groups of two or three

severely retarded persons in apartments, as ordered by the court, rather than in houses was "misguided" and ought to be discontinued.

Besides costing as much on the average as the care provided in the large state facilities that the court sought to outlaw, the apartments studied by the commission had "less adequate" treatment than the homes housing as many as 10 to 15 retarded persons.

But overall, the report said, the move to community residences had been successful in cutting costs and providing "homelike and normalizing" care. The median cost for group residences, both the state's and those of the voluntary agencies, was \$28,639 a year for each resident compared with \$37,024 a year in the institutions, which are called development centers.

The commission's study is to be made public tomorrow. It represents the first attempt by a state agency to measure what has long been the position taken by advocates of community-based homes for the retarded: that they are cheaper and provide better care.

That assertion was at the heart of the successful Federal court suit brought on behalf of 5,400 residents of the Willowbrook State Hospital on Staten Island seven years ago. The suit led to the release to group homes and apartments of thousands of patients formerly housed in unsafe and unsanitary conditions at Willowbrook. Since the suit was settled, the state and plaintiffs have wrangled over the pace of compliance as well as the cost.

Judge John K. Bartels of Federal District Court in Brooklyn, the judge assigned to the case since 1976, said Friday that he had given a copy of the report to the special master he appointed last month to oversee state compliance with the order to place all but 250 of the Willowbrook patients in community residences.

Barbara Hawes, associate commissioner of the state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, applauded the report's call for an end to the use of apartments. But she criticized it for failing to consider adequately that state-run homes serve the most disabled of the former Willowbrook patients.

One of the reasons for the higher costs of the state was the higher salaries paid to its employees who provide direct care. The salaries range between \$10,410 and \$11,000 a year. Similar workers in voluntary agencies started at an average of \$9,920 annually. Fringe benefits for state employees amounted to 33 percent of annual salaries compared with 18 percent for those working in residences operated by voluntary agencies.

Job Used as Stepping Stone

Mr. Sundram said that despite the lower salaries in the voluntary agencies, their direct-care employees tended to be better educated and were working in those positions in order to get experience for future employment in clinical or professional jobs.

The median annual cost per resident for the apartment residences was \$40,074 a year, the report said. While the costs varied widely among the apart-

ment residences, Mr. Sundram said, this did not seem to depend on whether the residence was run by the state or a voluntary agency.

"In almost all areas reviewed, apartment residences, and particularly state-operated apartments, were rated less adequate than group residences, despite their significantly richer staffing ratios and higher costs," the report said.

Last spring the state agency unsuccessfully sought to have Judge Bartels strike the requirement in his decree that they use apartments to house 110 severely disabled former Willowbrook patients. Miss Hawes said agency officials were not planning any additional apartment placements while they appealed that decision.

To many, such as Jack Gorelick, associate executive director of the voluntary Association for the Help of the Mentally Retarded, which was among the groups that brought the Willowbrook suit, the study represented stronger evidence that the state should not only continue to move patients into smaller homes but also depend more on the voluntary agencies.

"We have a running start in an area that the state has resisted," said Mr. Gorelick. "The state should be the provider of last resort for this service and that would allow them to do the monitoring that they should be doing."