

# State takes over the reins of Willowbrook buildings

New York State, which five years ago gave up control of seven Staten Island Developmental Center buildings to a private group, quietly regained control of two of the buildings last night.

The transfer to state control of buildings 12 and 13 occurred without fanfare at 11:30 p.m., when supervisors and nurses for United Cerebral Associations of New York State (UCP) were replaced with state employees. The transfer was in marked contrast to five years ago, when state employees staged noisy demonstrations and held a four-day sickout to protest the switch to UCP control.

At the time, UCP, a private group based in Manhattan, complained that patient records had been intentionally misplaced to make the takeover difficult.

But UCP and state officials said yesterday that they had been working on the transfer back to state control of two buildings for several months. And state supervisors and medical personnel have been working inside the two buildings alongside UCP employees for the last three weeks.

"The transition has gone very smoothly," said Dr. Ella Curry, the director of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

UCP will continue to run the remaining five Willowbrook buildings that constitute the group's Karl Warner Center. Buildings 12 and 13 house 117 residents between the ages of 15 and 50, while the five buildings remaining under UCP control house 308.

Buildings 12 and 13 were the only two operated under a joint state-UCP staff, and the difficulties associated with such a system contributed to the agency's decision to return them to state control.

Under the dual-staff setup, UCP provided the supervisors and support teams, while the state provided the direct-care workers.

Robert Schonhorn, executive director of UCP, said that although cooperation between state staff and UCP supervisors had improved recently, it was still "very difficult to supervise people; who in essence didn't work for us."



Keith Penman, director of the Karl Warner Center, hands over the keys to Buildings 12 and 13 to Dr. Ella Curry, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

State officials said they approved the plan to reassume control of the buildings because it enabled them to reduce the number of layoffs resulting from the Willowbrook center's continued loss of patients. Patients are being transferred under a 1975 court decree that mandates that center patients be placed in smaller community-based facilities.

Dr. Curry said the state takeover of buildings 12 and 13 would generate about 89 new jobs, mostly for professionals and support staff.

She said without these jobs the state would have been forced to dismiss more than the 70 employees given layoff notices effective today.

Keith Penman, director of the Karl Warner Center, said all of the UCP employees displaced by the takeover would be given other jobs by the agency. "No one will lose a job at UCP," he said.

Penman said he believes that patients who received care by the private agency made significant progress.

"I believe that over the last five years, the clients received more therapy than they had in the past and were provided with a more coordinated system that enabled them to make more progress," Penman said. He said his only disappointment was that UCP failed to transfer more of the patients into community residences, where, he said, they can better reach their learning potential.

— BRUCE ALPERT