

Ex-Willowbrook patients housed in expensive facility

Foulup costing taxpayers \$14M

By BRUCE ALPERT
Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Two years ago, officials were ready to move Mary Jones from Flower Hospital in Manhattan to a less expensive community facility.

But the 24-year-old Miss Jones (not her real name), remains at Flower — where she continues to receive medical services she no longer requires. She is one of 102 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents moved

to Flower in 1978.

It costs taxpayers \$124,830 a year to keep her at Flower, which is said to be the most expensive retardation program in the United States. That amounts to \$14.97 million for the former Willowbrook patients.

"I'd say at least 75 of the class members (former Willowbrook residents) are ready to move into community facilities," said John Keane, Flower's executive director. "But we just have no place to

move them."

The problem is that the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities wants to place the residents in 10- to 50-bed facilities. But the New York Civil Liberties Union and others say the residents would be better off in three to five-bed apartments.

And while the case proceeds through the courts — a federal district court judge's ruling in favor of the smaller facilities is

being appealed by the state — the residents stay put, getting expensive care all sides agree is not needed.

"Believe me, nobody would like them out more than us," Keane said. "We have a host of people in need of our services waiting to get into the hospital."

Robert Levy, a counsel for the Civil Liberties Union, maintains that despite the high cost of running Flower, most patients would get far better care at half the

200-1-83

cost in community residences.

"They relate much better to others in the smaller settings as compared to institutions, where they tend to feel isolated and alienated," Levy said. "Some of those already transferred to three-bed apartments are feeding themselves for the first time in their lives."

But William Knowlton, spokesman for the state retardation agency, said officials simply can't find three- and four-bed

apartments for residents in Manhattan's tight real-estate market.

"We need some flexibility to place these residents, but so far we haven't been able to get it," Knowlton said.

Miss Jones, like most of the former Willowbrook residents moved to Flower, arrived with multiple handicaps and serious medical problems. The hospital was designed to meet the special

medical needs of the retarded patients, while providing them with programs to expand their intellectual skills.

Hospital officials say they developed a special wheelchair for Miss Jones that allows her to sit comfortably for the first time despite curvature of the spine — a condition common among mentally retarded denied proper care.

Afraid of all human contact and unable to speak or even hold a tooth brush when she entered Flower in May 1978, Miss Jones now responds readily to music and can brush her teeth with a little help, according to Marie DeRiso, Flower's director of operations.

"Frowning and crying has been replaced with laughing," said Ms.

DeRiso. Ms. DeRiso said that Miss Jones, like many other residents, is now ready to move into a community setting, where mental retardation experts believe the retarded can best reach their potential. The hospital, she noted, was designed to treat patients only until they were well enough to live in a more normal setting.

Levy said that Miss Jones and others could be moved if only the state would make a "real effort" to find three-, four- and five-bed facilities for them.

He said the state has limited itself to locations within six blocks of hospitals — a location he said is not needed despite the medical problems faced by many of the residents.

"And they have also cut back on the staff assigned to look for community facilities," Levy

charged. Knowlton, however, maintains that "there is no way" to persuade landlords to make the kind of renovations required to accommodate the Flower patients in small apartments.

Flower, which is operated by the Archdiocese of New York, has been the center of controversy since it opened as a 160-bed facility for the retarded in 1978. The hospital now has 58 non-Willowbrook patients.

Some, including Manhattan Borough President Andrew Stein, said the price per patient — in 1978 about \$89,000 a year — could not be justified. There were also charges that the high Medicaid rate was simply a move by then-Gov. Hugh L. Carey to win favor with the Archdiocese. Carey denied the charges.

Page 2 of 2