

More than 300 Island jobs may be lost

Connelly says care cuts may be final

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ALBANY — Assemblywoman Elizabeth A. Connelly said yesterday that lawmakers may be unable to restore the "substantial" cuts proposed by Gov. Mario M. Cuomo in mental health and mental retardation programs.

"We've been told not to say that these cuts will occur over our dead bodies," said Mrs. Connelly, noting the state's fiscal problems. "We were told if we did there would be a lot of dead bodies."

Mrs. Connelly, a West Brighton Democrat who chairs the Assembly Mental Health Committee, made her comments as the Legislature's fiscal committee heard testimony from Zygmund L. Slezak, commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

Slezak said his agency could maintain a "high level of care" despite the budget's call for a cut of 2,200 workers and an overall loss of about \$35 million.

The commissioner conceded, however, that staff-patient ratios would increase from 1.78-to-1 to as low as 1.67-to-1 in some upstate centers.

Such a change, he said, is impossible at Staten Island Developmental Center, Wilbrook, because of a court decree mandating minimum staffing levels.

As a result, he said, parents at upstate

centers are charging that money is being diverted from their programs to the Wilbrook center and making their children "second-class citizens."

Slezak said he has not yet prepared a breakdown of where the staff reductions would occur, but said 1,600 employees — ranging from top administrators to direct-care staff — would have to be laid off. Staten Island Developmental Center is slated to lose 333 full-time positions, but Slezak said that number can change as the budget evaluation continues.

Robert Norris, Slezak's deputy, meanwhile, said the state is considering a change in the designation of Flower Hospital in Manhattan to lower the cost of care provided for 100 former Staten Island Developmental Center residents housed there.

The hospital, operated by the Archdiocese of New York, receives a record Medicaid rate of \$127,000 per patient a year even though most of its patients no longer require its specialized care.

Norris said the state would like to establish 25- to 30-bed community facilities for the residents, but have been blocked by a federal court.

The court said the residents should be moved to four- to six-bed facilities, which the state says are not available.

"We may have no choice, with the residents stuck there with no place to go, but to change the program at Flower to lower the cost," Norris said.

Such a change, he said, would eliminate some of the high-priced medical services which the residents no longer need.

Mrs. Connelly said she fears the cuts in services at state and community mental retardation programs will result in expensive lawsuits and a loss of some federal funding — making the savings from the cutbacks counterproductive. The legislator said she also fears a deterioration of care because of a substantial reduction planned in the mental retardation agency's auditing bureau.

"But the problem is that if we add something to the budget, we'd have to take it away from somewhere else," Mrs. Connelly said. "And that will be difficult to do."

Mrs. Connelly says she is also concerned about cuts planned in community and outpatient psychiatric services.