

Willowbrook is a better place, but not good enough for some

The current controversy surrounding care of the mentally retarded should not be surprising when one considers the enormous task involved with creating, in effect, a social revolution.

It all started here, on Staten Island, with the scandals involving Willowbrook State School, since renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Clued by complaints from parents, the first story appeared in the Advance in November 1971 and told of horrors of the institution: Wards with as many as 60 half-naked patients supervised only by two aides; scenes where children were marched into a dining room and marched out again with only the food that they could grab from the tables; a woman who was in solitary confinement for three years.

Said one parent at the time, "The animals at the Staten Island Zoo have more space and get better care than the children at Willowbrook."

The story got attention elsewhere in the media, and Willowbrook became the catchword for all that was bad about institutions for the mentally retarded. It was a scandal that

dominated the local and state media in the early 1970s.

Although state officials ordered a probe immediately and attempted to initiate reforms, the institution was so enormous and so unwieldy that attempts to improve conditions seemed to accomplish little.

The turning point did not come until April 1975 when Gov. Hugh Carey signed the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a settlement of class action lawsuits initiated on behalf of Willowbrook patients. The 44-page document outlined specific reforms in all aspects of care — food, clothing, education, patient-staff ratio and therapy.

The most important aspect of the agreement was a promise by the state to move Willowbrook clients from the institution into the community. The ultimate goal was to provide clients with the "least restrictive and most normal living conditions possible." It was a dramatic change in direction for New York State in the way it cared for its mentally retarded.

So for the past decade, the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabil-

ities has been attempting to dismantle one service system while erecting another, changes that involve millions of dollars and thousands of people.

It is a process complicated by setbacks resulting from an economic recession which was not anticipated in the mid-1970s.

Even those who criticize the present level of care note that New York began its reforms with few precedents to serve as a frame of reference and that the state has since become a leader in contemporary approaches in care of the retarded.

"I think we're in a bad headache period now," said Marjory Ames, director of the Inter-Agency Council on Developmental Disabilities. "But it's a temporary hurdle. When you think about it, deinstitutionalization was a massive undertaking and you have to expect ups and downs."

"We've done some great things, some fantastic things," said Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly. "I don't want to be totally negative. We just haven't done enough of it."

— JULIE MACK