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Willowbrook numbers down, problems remain

By JULIE MACK

It is not utopia, say state officials, but it is no longer hell.

Indeed, the Staten Island Developmental Center has changed more than its name in the past decade. Ten years ago, when the institution was still called Willowbrook State School, the center was routinely used as an example of the worst in care for the mentally retarded.

Care at the institution has improved tremendously in the past decade. It had to. The state's hand was forced by a class action lawsuit filed by parents of Willowbrook clients, a lawsuit which culminated in the Willowbrook Consent Decree in 1975. The agreement ordered reforms in almost every aspect of care at the institution, including clothing, recreation, patient-staff

ratio, programming and evaluation, education, food and medical services.

The biggest impact of the agreement was the reduction of the institution's population, which totaled at one time more than 6,000, through placements in the other institutions and supervised residences in the community. Presently, more than 1,000 clients are still on the Willowbrook campus, including 300 who are under the care of United Cerebral Palsy of New York State.

The smaller population, the improved patient-staff ratio and the establishment of daily therapy for residents are reasons for hope that the institution has upgraded its quality of life for residents.

"I just don't know if you can

even compare the institution now to what it once was," said James Walsh, SIDC acting director. "For example, in the mid-1970s there were 5,200 patients served by a staff of 1,800. We still have 1,800 on staff, but the patient numbers have dropped to 740.

"I think client services have improved tremendously. We're doing everything in our power not only to fill the letter of the consent decree but also the spirit."

Yet there is still cause for concern, according to some who claim the consent decree has never been fully and effectively implemented.

"The state has been well-intentioned, but the concepts have never been followed through and

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