

# Developmental center won't close before 1987

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Despite Gov. Mario M. Cuomo's pledge to close the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), top state officials say the institution will remain open for another three years.

Moreover, the officials say a court-ordered deadline to reduce SIDC's population from more than 1,000 to 250 by spring 1985 cannot be met.

In a 72-page message presented to the Legislature yesterday, Cuomo listed the closing of SIDC as a priority, but did not give a specific closing date.

However, Henrik Dullea, director of the state Office of Operations, said it would be "several years before the Staten Island Developmental Center is entirely phased out."

"Our current target date is 1987 to have no more residents at the Staten Island Developmental Center *per se*," Dullea said.

Dullea also said that the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) has been asked to map out a plan for closing the institution. The plan will be delivered to the governor "within six months if not sooner," Dullea said.

OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Y. Webb issued a statement in Albany yesterday calling the move to eventually close Willowbrook a "dramatic decision."

It was Webb's office that Cuomo ordered to submit a plan to close the center by mid-1987.

Webb said the announcement "has met with praise from parents, concerned citizens and voluntary agencies from across the state," as indicated by the number of calls being received by his office.

"Some of these individuals and organizations were involved in the original litigation that resulted in the Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975," the statement said.

Major operational and capital savings are estimated to total more than \$40 million from the closing, he said, adding, "the closing of Willowbrook makes sense, not only from a humanitarian aspect, but from a management and fiscal standpoint on the wisest use of our public dollars."

Webb vowed to "make every effort to preserve our most critical resource — our work force."

Cuomo, according to the commissioner, "has insisted on assuring parents that the placement plan will be comprehensive, thoughtful and carefully monitored."

The future of SIDC has been the center of controversy since it was racked by scandals involving inadequate patient care in the early 1970s. Then called Willowbrook State School, it housed 6,000 patients.

In 1975, the state settled a class-action lawsuit by signing the Willowbrook Consent Decree, calling for the placement of its patients in community residences.

Under the plan, the state was

to place Willowbrook residents in community homes with no more than 15 beds and to reduce the institution's population to 250 by April 1981.

The agreement has since been modified, with the state claiming that lack of funds and the city's chronic housing shortage have hindered attempts to move clients.

The current deadline to reduce the population to 250 is March 1985.

But Dullea and Robert Norris, first deputy commissioner of the OMRDD, said the March deadline would not likely be met.

"The March 1985 date is pretty optimistic at this point," Norris said. "It may even take until 1986."

The state has not requested another extension of the deadline, but Norris noted that extensions have been granted in the past.

The delay is necessary because of the time needed to build the community residences to house Willowbrook patients, Norris said. He said that it will

take almost two years from the time money is appropriated for new community residences until those residences are ready to be occupied.

Cuomo said in his message yesterday that 1,400 community beds will open in the 1984 fiscal year. But some of those beds are expected to be allocated to the retarded now living at home or at other centers in the state.

"There was a general feeling this past year that the commitment to community placement for the mentally retarded had slipped," said Cora Hoffman, assistant executive director of United Cerebral Palsy of New York State.

"This message by Cuomo gives everybody who has worked on this — both in voluntary agencies and in state offices — new hope that the governor now also has a commitment. It gives us a new sense of purpose."

Despite the prospects of yet more delays, Norris said that Cuomo's commitment gives reason for hope.

"It's been a long struggle," he

said, "but with broad-based support, we can finally see light at the end of the tunnel."

Assembly Mental Health Committee Chairwoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, however, said in Albany that she feels the center should remain open in some form past the court deadline, even though much of the land on which it sits could be used for other purposes.

State Senator John J. Marchi of Staten Island said in response to Cuomo's announcement, "Let us be certain that, in our efforts to improve conditions for those who deserve our compassionate help, we do not worsen their circumstances and quality of life." Closing the institution would require the approval of the Legislature.

Marchi, who raised several questions about the plan, such as how and where the patients would be cared for, added, "Nothing of substance will be approved by the Senate until we are satisfied that the plans are humane, solidly based and well-reasoned."