

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."