

# State may be softening on '87 closing for SIDC

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ALBANY — Only a snarl in plans for hundreds of new housing spaces for the mentally retarded would delay a 1987 closing of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), Willowbrook, according to a key state official.

Commissioner Arthur Webb of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities made the forecast yesterday while acknowledging "skepticism" has met Gov. Mario M. Cuomo's vow to close the center.

Appearing to soften his public posture, Webb termed 1987 a "goal" for the closing. He reiterated that his office plans to open 722 new community residences for the mentally retarded during the next two years, but admitted delays were possible.

Staten Island legislators have cautioned against closing the center without knowing where the patients from the center will go and for what the property will be used.

Webb made the remarks to a reporter following a legislative hearing on Cuomo's budget for the mentally retarded for the coming fiscal year.

During the hearing, Assembly Ways and Means Committee Chairman Arthur Kremer, D-Long Beach, suggested that his panel and the Senate Finance Committee would reword budget measures so that minimum staffing levels for Webb's office are set by law.

In his testimony, Webb urged lawmakers to avoid spelling out each detail in this unusual way.

The move stems from a furor carried over from last year. Lawmakers charge that Cuomo's budget staff violated their expressed intent to restore staffing levels to those existing prior to austerity cuts ordered a year ago.

Assembly Mental Health Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Chairwoman Elizabeth A. Connelly, D-West Brighton, said such bills are about to be drafted and she supports the effort.

She also further questioned the closing of the Willowbrook center.

For example, she cited intentions expressed by state officials to provide care for patients who "age out" of the system when they reach 21 and have nowhere to go.

A report from Webb on the plans for the closing, not yet made public, recently was submitted to the governor and presented to lawmakers including Republican Sens. John J. Marchi of Staten Island and Frank Padavan of Queens, as well as Mrs. Connelly.

But the Island assemblywoman maintained that the report included no new information, beyond a consultant's study completed more than four years ago on possible uses of the center.

Webb has not advocated any particular plan for use of the property, she said.

In addition, lawmakers listened "with mouths open" in disbelief to Webb's recent statement that 400 beds will be

provided statewide in the next couple of months.

Last week, Cuomo acted to amend his Jan. 17 executive budget proposal to the Legislature, as he has the option to do within 30 days of the budget's presentation.

It was announced that \$23 million more was being requested for the two agencies serving the mental retarded and disabled.

But Mrs. Connelly challenged the figure yesterday, saying only \$13 million of that total truly represents a proposal for new expenditures.

Eight million dollars of the proposed funding boost is a correction for a budgeting error made earlier that resulted in the exclusion of \$8 million for salary increases for community residence staffs, she said.

While there was an additional \$1.6 million announced "to restore school-based drug education programs to prior levels," and that figure needs to be examined critically as well, she said.

The governor had taken \$3.3 million from budgets for prior programs to create funding for new programs, and so the proposed \$1.6 million represents only half a restoration, she said.

According to a breakdown of the figures by Ways and Means staff, \$14.3 million is slated to go to SIDC to fund the takeover of the Karl D. Warner Center from United Cerebral Palsy of New York State (UCP).

But that money is coming from another part of the budget that used to fund the state service contract with UCP, half of which is paid through Medicaid, SIDC Director James Walsh said.

Meanwhile, among the morass of mental health items funded in this year's proposed state budget, the Elizabeth W. Pouch center on Staten Island has announced it has received a commitment for hundreds of thousands in state funds.