

# 'State home a snake pit'

By MARVIN SMILON and CHARLES LACHMAN

THE parents of 10 retarded patients at a state institution in Rockland County charged in a lawsuit filed yesterday that the home is a veritable snake pit of ghastly conditions.

The class-action suit, filed in Manhattan federal court, charges that patients at Letchworth Village Development Center in Thiells have been sexually abused and drugged.

The suit, filed on behalf of the 1700 patients at Letchworth, asks that the state be ordered to make sure that patients receive adequate food, clothing, and treatment programs at Letchworth.

Defendants include Gov. Cuomo, state Mental Retardation and Development Commissioner Arthur Webb, and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Margaret Heckler.

A spokesman for Webb's office said: "We can't comment on the suit until we've been served with the papers."

Only last week, Mrs. Heckler penalized New York state \$58 million in Medicaid contributions for failing to correct health and safety conditions at five state centers for the retarded and disabled.

One of the institutions cited by Mrs. Heckler was Letchworth.

The lawsuit filed yesterday makes these charges:

- Patients live in wards that are "barren, noisy, and prison-like."
- They are "herded together" into community rooms for most of the day and sleep in unpartitioned wards at night.
- Some residents walk about partially clothed. Others are naked.
- The bathroom facilities are inadequate, malodorous, and unsanitary.
- Although almost all mentally retarded people can learn to control bladder and bowel movements, many at Letchworth have not even been toilet trained.
- Food is "unappetizing, served at improper temperature, and prepared and kept in unsanitary vermin-infested kitchen and storage areas."
- For punishment, patients are subjected to "physical and mechanical restraints, seclusion, and potent medications."
- The institution is understaffed and employees are ill-trained.
- The death rate among patients is higher than for other institutions and is steadily increasing.