

'Horrors' at home for retarded

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Detailing conditions reminiscent of the 1948 movie "The Snake Pit," parents of mentally retarded residents of the Letchworth Village Developmental Center in Rockland County filed a class action suit yesterday seeking "extensive relief from the horrendous conditions long existing at the institution."

The suit, filed in Manhattan Federal Court by the families of four men and six women, details what they called a "chamber of horrors" at the institution.

It charges Gov. Cuomo, other state officials and U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler with failing to enforce rights of the residents "to enhance and maintain their skills and avoid deterioration and regression."

BROUGHT ON behalf of more than 1,700 retarded individuals living at Letchworth or on its rolls, the suit also charges the defendants with failing to provide appropriate alternate programs and services that would permit placement of residents in community homes "so that they may be released from confinement."

Last week, the federal government announced the state would be penalized \$58.6 million in funding for failure to comply with Medicaid standards concerning overcrowding at five upstate retardation centers, including Letchworth. State officials said then that they would make a "good faith" effort to improve conditions.

In the 34-page affidavit filed yesterday, the parents demanded that conditions be improved or the center closed. The latter is their ultimate goal, according to their attorney, Murray Schneps.

Schneps described Letchworth patients who, he said, were "deteriorating and regressing physically, intellectually and psychologically," and cited the example of a 22-year-old male who was the victim of "persistent physical and sexual abuse and the inappropriate and excessive use of drugs and medication."

MANY PATIENTS, whose IQ levels range from moderately retarded (36 to 50) to profoundly retarded (under 20), "reside in barren, noisy and prison-like wards and sleeping areas" and "spend most or all of their days in bare rooms, many sitting or lying unattended on uncarpeted floors and others confined to wheelchairs neither designed for their particular needs nor kept in good repair," court papers stated.

"Locked doors and lack of staff bar their movement... even to bedrooms and bathrooms," the papers said, and belongings "are usually lost, stolen or destroyed within a short period of time."

"Some residents are partially clothed, and others go completely unclothed for all or part of the day," according to the suit.

Ilene Margolin, speaking for Cuomo, said the governor had not seen the papers and would have no immediate comment on the suit.