

# Staten Island

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## Willowbrook again

Despite accusations that the Staten Island Developmental Center was being operated with serious deficiencies, local and state officials said many of the problems have been corrected and the remainder are being "addressed."

The center (formerly Willowbrook State Hospital) was one of nine facilities for the mentally retarded cited by U.S. Health and Human Services Department Secretary Margaret Heckler in Washington yesterday as having serious health and safety problems.

In testimony to a Senate subcommittee, Heckler called the situation at state-run facilities in several sections of the country "appalling."

She said federal investigators toured 17 institutions last month and found substandard conditions in all of them. Nine, including Staten Island, suffered from "major health and safety deficiencies," although not necessarily life-threatening, she said.

In Albany, a state spokesman said the charges were dated and New York had already moved to correct the problems at the center.

Lou Ganim, spokesman for the state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said Heckler's statements were based on a federal audit released in June. That document, he said, included information from inspections done last winter.

"WE'VE ALREADY BEGUN a plan of correction, which has been accepted by the New York State Health Department ... and is already two-thirds complete," he said.

Ganim added that he did not believe federal officials had seen the correction plan, which he said was given final

approval last week.

"Every deficiency noted in their audit is being addressed," Ganim said.

The entire 300-acre site that was once Willowbrook is in the process of being phased out but plans for what exactly will happen to the state-owned land are still incomplete. One tentative plan is to make it a new campus of the College of Staten Island.

Some 90 acres, however, will be retained by the State Mental Retardation Office.

Last February, Arthur Webb, head of the office, visited the developmental center and said he very "impressed with the place. I only wish there were more like it in the state."

**WEBB SAID AT THE time:** "We will close Willowbrook as we know it today ... and the center will be reduced to slightly under 1,000 clients to be placed in varied settings."

He indicated then that "brand new, specially built units designed with a home background and no institutional flavor" would replace the older structures.

James Walsh, executive director of the center, was unavailable for comment late yesterday.

Heckler also said yesterday the federal government would double surveillance efforts at all the facilities and would not pay for poor treatment. She also made special note of the fact that in early June it had disallowed \$59 million in Medicaid reimbursements that New York had sought for its developmental centers.

The Staten Island center received widespread notoriety for poor conditions in the early 1970s when it was still



Arthur Webb

known as Willowbrook. The publicity and a subsequent investigation resulted in the Willowbrook Consent Decree of 1975, which called for reducing the number of people being kept there.

Ganim said the state was in compliance with the order and that, as of July 12, the center held 813 people. He said the goal was to bring the population down to 534 by March 31 of next year and to close the center in 1987.