

It's your opinion

STATEN ISLAND SUNDAY ADVANCE, August 12, 1984

Commissioner raps SIDC editorial

Willowbrook is not, by any means or stretch of the imagination, the same institution that Robert Kennedy walked into 19 years ago.

Nonetheless, your editorial on the Staten Island Developmental Center — "Nineteen years later, bad news from SIDC" — would have us believe that we've been thrown back to those days when Senator Kennedy tried to thrust the public's eye on the failure of the Willowbrook State School.

Your editorial takes great license in making claims that a recent federal audit conducted at the Staten Island institution "documents, page after page, the horrors of life at the developmental center." To the contrary, the report points out *deficiencies* cited by surveyors, whose job it is to look for problems so that they can be corrected.

In this latest federal survey, problems, clearly, were found. The majority of them have been corrected, and the state Department of Health has accepted a plan by the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities to correct the remainder of the deficiencies.

Since the time when the name "Willowbrook" became synonymous with the inability of the state to care for the developmentally disabled, the Staten Island Advance and other newspapers and radio and television stations have charted the course of the institution as it has moved forward from its darkest days. And during that time, and today, the reporters have witnessed the fact that dramatic change has been accomplished.

It is not the same institution that once crowded 5,300 individuals into its confines and provided only custodial care. There are now just over 800 individuals at the institution; by next April there will be about 500 persons in the center, and by mid-1987 Willowbrook will be closed.

No longer at Staten Island Developmental Center — nor at any other institution for the disabled — is custodial care the order of the day. Each client has the benefit of a programming model that requires that every disabled person be given six hours of active treatment a day.

No longer do the deplorable

conditions exist that resulted in numerous fire safety, life safety and health safety violations at Willowbrook. The very audit you quote from recognizes how far the institution has come by the absence of major environmental and safety-related citations.

As an agency, we have prepared a comprehensive plan of correction that deals with the specific shortcomings noted in the audit. As commissioner, I am extremely concerned about the quality of care that the state is providing its disabled individuals at Staten Island and throughout the mental retardation system.

Unquestionably, we must move quickly to correct problems that are found in developmental centers — whether they are found by the state itself or by an outside agent such as the federal government. That is what we have done in the case of the audit of the Staten Island Development Center.

Your newspaper has had, and will continue to have, every opportunity to come to the Staten Island institution to examine first-hand the center's operation.

I agree with you that we have further to go to provide high-quality care for the disabled, but I disagree with the sensationalist manner in which you chose to exaggerate the problems at the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Mentally retarded and developmentally disabled individuals must not be deprived of their rights and they must be able to live as normal a life as possible. Great strides forward have been made in the past decade by dedicated individuals concerned about the type of care we give the disabled. Further progress will be made as we continue the opening of community beds that will enable the state to reduce the institutionalized population.

ARTHUR Y. WEBB

Albany

(The writer is state commissioner of Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.)