

State: SIDC will close by '87; resettling residents a problem

The state will fulfill its promise to close the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) by the end of 1987, but resettling its clients into the community will take another 10 years, according to the commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

Meanwhile, a study released this week by OMRDD shows about 12,400 mentally retarded New Yorkers are awaiting placement in supervised group homes. The study surveyed 268 private and governmental agencies to reach that conclusion, spokesman Louis Ganim said.

The growing demand for group home beds has complicated the phaseout of the Staten Island institution, OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Webb said during an interview with the Advance. However, Webb said closing SIDC is a top priority of his agency.

Plans for the final phaseout of the institution are still being drafted, Webb said, but the SIDC should have only 250 clients by April 1986, all living in the Karl Warner Complex, the newest section of the SIDC campus.

Webb said his agency will vacate most of the campus within two years, retreating to the so-called Richmond Complex. That complex, on 90 acres in the southeast corner of the campus, will contain the state Institute for Basic Research in Mental Retardation, existing group homes for about 75 people and four group homes proposed for construction. SIDC would no longer exist.

The institution's plans have attracted interest in recent months, as a state task force debates the future of the almost 300 acres which OMRDD is vacating.

The closing of the SIDC is also significant because it takes the state one step closer to fulfilling the Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed in 1975 to settle a

class-action lawsuit charging the state with neglecting residents at the institution.

In addition to establishing better standards of care at the SIDC, the decree mandated that the center reduce its population to 250 by 1981 and place the other 5,000 "class" clients represented in the lawsuit in community residences.

The state has returned to court several times in recent years to extend the 1981 deadline. The current deadline is this year, but Webb said his office has already written Judge John Bartels of the U.S. District Court in Brooklyn asking for another year extension. In the past, Bartels has granted extensions as long as the state continues "significant" progress in reducing patient population.

The SIDC now has 713 residents. Of the clients in the class action, 1,085 are in other state developmental centers, 525 are in "family care" (similar to foster care), 1,479 are living in group homes or supervised apartments, 812 have returned to their families and 721 have died.

Webb noted that the consent decree will not be fulfilled until all the residents are living in the community. And that, he said, could take another 10 years after Willowbrook is closed.

"It will take that long because there are a lot of leaks in the existing system," Webb said. "The class clients are not the only people we serve."

He noted that his agency is also trying to empty other developmental centers, plus there are people who have never been institutionalized but need residential care now.

In the past decade, because of the consent decree, Willowbrook clients have had priority in community placement, Webb said. "Of all the beds we've opened in the past 10 years, clearly over

half have gone to the class clients. That's the problem with having a sub-group that has greater rights than the rest."

Webb said that resettling the Willowbrook clients into the community is a two-step process: The resident is moved from Willowbrook to another developmental center in the state, usually the center closest to the client's family, and from there, the client awaits placement in a community residence, such as a group home or supervised apartment. As community placements are made, and beds open up in the developmental centers, the SIDC discharges more clients to other institutions.

Of the 1,400 community beds to be added in the upcoming fiscal year, 492 are targeted for current and former Willowbrook residents, according to Webb. By the time Willowbrook closes, he said, only 1,000 clients from the class action will still be residing in developmental centers throughout the state.

Citing figures in the OMRDD study released this week, Ganim said group home accommodations for about 8,400 people will need to be created over the next six years.

The OMRDD study found that the population in developmental centers has dropped by nearly half — from 20,000 to fewer than 11,000 — in the last 10 years. Meanwhile, the number of group homes was swelled from less than 20 nine years ago to about 1,000 now.

Some 6,000 of the people on group home waiting lists are between the ages of 16 and 30, "with the greatest demand for residential care coming from young adults moving from state educational programs who need adult-oriented services," according to the study.

About 55 percent of those awaiting placement are from New York City and Long Island, the study found.

— JULIE MACK
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