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## Editorial Page

*Our opinion/*

# New trouble at SIDC

Last year, when federal inspectors criticized conditions at the Staten Island Developmental Center, state officials insisted things weren't really as bad as they seemed.

At the time, Center Director James Walsh predicted that if inspectors returned to the center they would find much improvement since their visit in February 1984. "They may still find problems, but they would see that issues are being addressed," he said.

Mr. Walsh was wrong.

A new federal inspection, conducted two months ago, found many of the same problems as last year's inspection. In fact, the inspectors specifically rapped the state for its "chronic history" of ignoring federal recommendations for improvement. "Deficiencies still remain and have limited the capacity of your facility to render care without hazard to the health and safety of your patients," the inspectors concluded.

The consequences of this failed inspection are severe. Unless it wins an appeal, the developmental center will lose \$21 million in Medicaid funding. That represents half of the center's \$42 million annual budget, the remainder of which is supplied by the city and state.

Predictably, state officials are protesting the federal decision. As they have so many times in the past, they say that the center is making improvements, that the deficiencies will soon be corrected, that things aren't as bad as they appear.

We've heard these assurances before — last year, for example, and the year before that. How many times can the same old promises be made before someone is made accountable?

The federal Department of Health and Human Services, for one, has heard enough. After 10 years of having its recommendations ignored, it

has finally taken punitive action. The state has no one to blame but itself.

Last year, when the federal criticisms were first publicized, the state mental health commissioner and several center employees argued that the developmental center has improved considerably since the days when it was known as Willowbrook State School. We expect those arguments will resurface again as the latest inspection is debated.

They miss the point entirely. It is not enough that the developmental center is not as bad as it was during the worst point in its history. That is not a difficult standard to meet. Almost anything would be better than the "snakepit" of the early 1970s.

Rather, the real question is whether the developmental center has continued to improve from year to year, whether it comes close to meeting the the ideals for patient care.

We cannot answer that question; we can only put our trust in federal inspectors with expertise in the field. When those inspectors make a determination, we have to assume they have some basis in fact. There is a margin for error, but in this case the margin seems to be too great to ignore.

After 20 years of intense public scrutiny, we expect the developmental center to be not just better than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, but *significantly* better. Unfortunately, that may not be the case. The federal inspectors are very disappointed, and so are we. On the basis of last year's statements, we expected better.

If it takes a Medicaid cutoff to bring the center up to federal standards, then so be it. We have come a long way from the days of "Willowbrook," but we have not come far enough.