

A look back

Willowbrook case continues

By JULIE MACK

Advance Staff Writer

In 1975, state officials and advocates for the retarded, in reaching a court settlement, figured it would take 13 months to implement reforms at Willowbrook State School and six years to reduce the institution's patient population from 5,300 to 250.

Today, a decade after those promises were made, the institution — now called the Staten Island Developmental Center — still has more than 600 clients and, according to some, its quality of care is still amiss. Yet the state commissioner in charge of services for the mentally retarded says the landmark document which forced the reforms is "outdated" and should be abolished.

The document, the Willowbrook Consent Decree, was signed by Gov. Hugh Carey to settle a class-action lawsuit charging the state with neglect of Willowbrook residents. The lawsuit was filed in 1971 after parent protests and media investigations revealed the institution's squalid conditions.

The 29-page consent judgment established minimum standards for every aspect of client care at the institution. The document also specified that the state eventually place all but 250 of

SIDC's residents into community residences.

The consent judgment was a victory for the Willowbrook residents, who were represented in

the case by the New York Civil Liberties Union. But it has proved to be a qualified victory, according to the NYCLU. "We've transformed the rhetoric, but we

haven't gone as far as we would like in transforming the reality," said Chris Hansen, an NYCLU (See DECREE, Page A 12)



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