

Not all developmental centers have SIDC's style — or woes

SARATOGA, N.Y. — Wilton Developmental Center works hard to contradict the stereotype of the drab and dreary institution.

Located at the foothills of the Adirondacks about 10 miles north of Saratoga Springs, Wilton is considered one of the state's best institutions for the mentally retarded. The facility is clean and attractive; the staff is committed and innovative; the patients seem happy.

The institution also provides an interesting contrast to Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC); the differences between the two facilities are painstakingly obvious, even though both are state-operated facilities that serve the same sort of client. Wilton has 377 clients, 81 percent of whom are severely or profoundly retarded. SIDC has 619 residents, 98 percent of whom are profoundly retarded. The similarities, for the most part, end there.

The biggest contrast is in appearance. Most clients at SIDC are live in wards divided into cubicles for sleeping. At Wilton, residents live in "apartments" with private bedrooms, two residents to an apartment.

The wards at SIDC, especially in the older buildings, are undeniably drab and dreary, with exposed pipes running across the ceiling, windows that permit little light and ugly green paint. The newer buildings at SIDC, the so-called Warner Complex, are more aesthetically pleasing, but even with pictures on the walls and centerpieces on the dining room tables, there is no getting away from an austere, institutional appearance.

At Wilton, bedroom walls are covered with panel or wallpaper and each room is individually decorated. Each group of four bedrooms has its own sitting area, which resembles the living room of any middle-class home. Every group of 12 bedrooms has its own dining room, a kitchen area and a lounge. In the middle of the facility is the large common area — including a cafe that is open to clients and staff alike — which, by necessity, lacks the coziness of the residential units. But throughout, Wilton feels more like a resort than an institution.

The differences between SIDC and Wilton in this area can be easily explained. Most of the buildings at SIDC were con-

structed more than 40 years, when the idea was to provide the mentally retarded with a hospital-like environment. Wilton was constructed in 1969, when the philosophy was beginning to shift toward providing the retarded with a home-like environment; hence, its very design tries to avoid an institutional feeling.

SIDC is at an additional disadvantage: Since the state wants to close the facility, it has been reluctant to pump much money into improving the physical plant. While there have been many cosmetic improvements, further upgrading would cost millions of dollars — a cost the state says it cannot justify.

Another comparison is the area of education and training program. At SIDC, outside visitors say it is not unusual to walk into a room during a weekday and see patients watching television or appearing to be doing nothing. SIDC staff explains it is extremely difficult to provide training for such severely disabled patients, even through the consent decree mandates 30 hours of programming per week. Wilton serves the same sort of severely disabled clientele, yet activity is plainly visible in their therapy rooms.