

Opinion/

Federal ruling will hurt SIDC clients

We wish to respond to the recent action by the Federal Health Care Finance Administration to withdraw certification of Staten Island Developmental Center as an Intermediate Care Facility, thereby making clients here ineligible for Medicaid funding.

This shocking decision is unwarranted and may very well result in hardship for the residents and for the staff who have worked to improve the facility since the troubled days which gave rise to the Willowbrook Consent Judgment. As an oversight and advisory body with firsthand knowledge of the operations of Staten Island Developmental Center, we challenge the accuracy of the picture painted by the federal monitors. It is charged that the facility is unable to insure the safety and health of its clients, that programs for their habilitation are not in place, and that clients' basic human rights are jeopardized.

While Staten Island Developmental Center is not perfect, it is simply untrue that the widespread deficiencies alleged by the federal government exist.

The campus of Staten Island Developmental Center is old, the buildings difficult to maintain, and, of course, not as aesthetically pleasing as the newest state facilities. However, massive improvements have been accomplished in providing individual living areas for clients, revamping of the food service operations, addition of trained direct care and professional staff, and provision of active treatment for all clients at the facility.

Particularly during recent months, the staff at the facility have worked diligently at correcting deficiencies cited by various monitoring agencies who continually scrutinize the operations there. Just days before the announcement of decer-

tification by the federal government, state monitors surveying according to the federal standards had audited the facility and had found it not only certifiable, but much improved over previous audits.

Additionally, experts in various specialties related to developmental disabilities appointed by the courts to monitor compliance with the Willowbrook Consent Decree, have noted significant improvement. Certainly, nowhere has it been suggested, except in the current decision to decertify, that the facility is so deficient as to jeopardize clients' very safety. The facility is open to public scrutiny and it is our contention that objective, knowledgeable observers will find the decertification totally unjustifiable except perhaps as a convenient means of reducing the flow of federal dollars at the expense of a relatively powerless group of citizens, the clients of Staten Is-

land Developmental Center.

It is widely known, after all, that Staten Island Developmental Center will close within the next two years and it is, after all, the infamous Willowbrook and, therefore, an easy target.

The very unfortunate flaw in reasoning of this kind is that clients will continue to live at Staten Island Developmental Center until it can be closed in an orderly fashion, the already beleaguered staff will be required to continue meeting the standards of the Consent Judgment, and improvements in the programs must continue to be made, but with considerably less in resources as a result of decertification. The decision will not close Staten Island Developmental Center; it will merely, take away its funding.

If our federal monitors are so concerned about the residents' health and safety, what is their thinking with regard to what

will happen to these clients after their primary source of funding is withdrawn?

We have carefully reviewed the list of deficiencies upon which the decertification was based. We feel that the list contains errors of fact that it misleadingly conveys an impression of widespread inadequacies, which we know not to be the case. An impartial review will confirm the facility's improvements and we urge that an appeal of the decertification be pursued immediately.

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