

—Island news— SIDC—

Sonia Braniff, member of the SIDC Board of Visitors, which serves as an advocate for SIDC's 600 mentally retarded residents, said the board checked out some of the problems cited in the federal report. "We made a visit to the buildings cited in the report and we found that practically everything cited as a problem has been remedied," Mrs. Braniff said.

"Interestingly enough, some of the issues seem a little picky. Not that the issues were inappropriate, but when you read that Medicaid certification has been taken away, you assume that there must be gross deficiencies. And there were not gross deficiencies," she said.

Rudy Mangione, a court-appointed special master overseeing SIDC, said his office also had difficulty in verifying some of the deficiencies cited by the federal government. "In our review of the federal survey, there were some things we couldn't put our finger on," he said.

Webb claims that a survey by the state Health Department in May shows that SIDC has made "very substantial progress." In fact, Webb said, in the exit interview with federal auditors after they visited SIDC in February, the auditors praised the facility for correcting previous deficiencies. It was only in the subsequent report that the facility was criticized as severely deficient, he said. "It was like they went back and wrote the report in such a way to paint as bad a picture as possible."

"We've written to them a number of times and asked them for assistance in understanding the deficiencies," Webb added, "and they just tell us that the standards are very clear."

If the federal government was truly concerned about conditions at SIDC, Mrs. Connelly said, it should take up the matter with the special master. "What's so funny is that SIDC is really in the hands of the federal government — it is being monitored by a federal court and has a federal master. It seems like they would discuss the matter with the master if they have a problem. If not, what's the point of the master? What's the point of (federal Judge John) Bartels?"

Some say the whole situation is simply unfair to the clients.

"The end result of all this is an undermining of confidence in the government to continue funding these kinds of programs," Webb said.

Added Matteo Lumatta, president of the SIDC Board of Visitors: "If the Willowbrook residents are used for political reasons, well, it wouldn't be the first time."