

Feds change mind on \$21M for SIDC

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The federal Department of Health and Human Services has withdrawn its decision to cancel \$21 million in Medicaid funding for the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), the Advance has learned.

Based on the results of federal on-site surveys on June 12 and June 18, the federal agency found that "many of the deficiencies previously identified have been corrected, and significant progress has been made towards the elimination of the remaining deficiencies."

In a letter to SIDC Director James Walsh, Alan Saperstein, a federal administrator who oversees the Medicaid program in the region, also noted that the client census has decreased from 550 to 298, and the number of residential buildings in use dropped from nine to six. This is in line with the state's intention to phase out the center in two years.

However, Saperstein also indicated that several minor deficiencies remain, and that they would be detailed in another letter to Walsh to be sent in a few days. The federal government surveyed the center in February and issued a report in April in which it had determined that SIDC had a number of patient-care deficiencies that would disqualify it from receiving federal funding. It threatened to withdraw \$21 mil-

lion in Medicaid money, which makes up half of its operating budget. Walsh appealed the decision in May, and requested that the federal agency make another inspection.

"I feel very happy and glad for the clients and the staff of the facility that their efforts are being recognized by the federal government," Walsh said. "There is no doubt in my mind that we were providing the best quality of care to our clients, and this just confirms it."

She also charged that it was a way to embarrass Gov. Mario Cuomo, who is a possible contender for the Democratic presidential ticket in the next election. State officials also agreed that the Medicaid cutoff was an attempt to reduce government spending.

Saperstein disagreed. "Any illusion that any of our actions did not have to do with quality of care is preposterous," Saperstein said of the federal government's original decision. He said the Reagan administration has hired additional staff to monitor facilities such as SIDC, and surveys have become more critical of deficiencies. Moreover, surveys will be conducted at least once a year, whereas previously, they were done on a random basis.

Mrs. Connelly, chairman of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation and

Walsh said that if the money had been cut, the state would have had to make up the difference. But, he said, there might have been the possibility that all of the money would not have been appropriated, which would have resulted in a loss of some staff.

Saperstein, associate regional administrator for the Health Care Financing Administration, a division of the Health and Human Services which monitors Medicaid-funded institutions, said the decision to rescind the threatened cutback was based on the federal inspectors' last month. The surveyors found significant improvements in patient care since the February visit, he said.

Among the improvements: Follow-up educational, training and medical programs have been instituted; staff members are more aware of what residents were learning during the day, and are helping them apply those skills at night; 25 additional nurses were hired; medical staff has been making daily rounds; additional speech and hearing staff has been hired; a new supervising dietitian has also been added; and the kitchen has been renovated to include new steam tables to reheat vegetables.

"We were very, very pleased," said Saperstein, a Willowbrook resident, who lives four blocks from SIDC and jogs on the grounds to "keep an eye on the buildings."

"A lot of problems before had to do with staffing."

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly and state mental retardation officials had charged that the federal government's decision to cut SIDC from the Medicaid program was a political move. Mrs. Connelly had said that the federal government was doing this to find ways to cut the Medicaid budget.

Developmental Disabilities, yesterday hailed the federal government's decision not to withdraw the funding.

"Fairness and justice wins out," she said. "They may have been found with a little egg on their face. SIDC has been under federal mandate since 1975. They (the federal government) have been the overseers. If they had a problem, they should have taken it up sooner. My point is that they looked pretty foolish."

The state Health Department had monitored SIDC after the federal survey in February, and had not found deficiencies that would strike it from the Medicaid program, Lou Ganim, a spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said. That prompted Walsh to appeal the federal government's decision to cut its Medicaid funding. State Medicaid money provides the remaining 50 percent of the center's operating budget.

According to Saperstein, remaining deficiencies that need to be corrected include a lack of client privacy during medical examinations and delays in obtaining hearing aids for clients and enrolling them in speech therapy. However, he said these deficiencies are relatively minor compared with those of the past 10 years.