

A long history of shame and solution

The name of the Willowbrook State School became a catch phrase in the early 1970s for the nation's short-sighted and negligent attitude toward the mentally retarded.

During the mid-1960s, the facility warehoused more than 6,000 residents, 25 percent of the state's institutionalized retarded population. Seventy-five percent were multihandicapped. With a staff-resident ratio of 1 to 30 or 40, the level of basic care was questionable at best.

Children and adults wallowed in their own waste. Others walked around naked or were left in strait-jackets. Residents remained for hours in the "day room" with nothing to do but wait for the next meal; many turned to self-abuse — picking at or hitting themselves — as their only form of stimulation.

In 1965, the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy toured Willowbrook and blasted the school for the conditions he found. Little changed, however, until attention was once again focused on Willowbrook in late 1971.

This time the clamour was too great. The state's care of the men-

tally retarded in a number of state facilities came under attack from legislators, the media, parents of mentally retarded and civil rights groups.

In early 1972, a coalition of advocates for the mentally retarded brought a federal class action against the state Department of Mental Health and Gov. Nelson Rockefeller. The suit charged that the level of treatment at Willowbrook violated the resident's constitutional rights.

Testimony in the case began in October 1974. Eight months later, the two sides came to a settlement, known as the Willowbrook Consent Decree, which was approved by a Brooklyn federal judge and signed by Gov. Hugh Carey.

The order called for the relocation of Willowbrook residents to community-based group homes and a reduction of its population to 250 residents by the spring of 1976. This deadline was soon extended to 1981 when it became clear the first deadline would not be met.

In January 1981, more than 900 residents still lived at Willowbrook, which was renamed the

Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC.) Hundreds of millions of dollars had been spent following through on the settlement and millions more continue to be spent.

Community opposition to the group homes slowed their development. The majority of residents were transferred to other large institutions in the state rather than community facilities. A variety of issues related to the decree continued to be handled in courts and in Albany.

In 1984, Gov. Mario Cuomo, seeking to "mark the end of a regrettable chapter in the treatment of the mentally retarded,"

vowed to close SIDC. State officials said it would take three years.

Since then, a plan was introduced and accepted that would unify the College of Staten Island's two campuses on SIDC's grounds. A number of buildings will be destroyed, others will be renovated.

Last April 1, the facility's census finally reached the target number of 250. Next year, the facility is scheduled to close, its now fewer than 200 residents will move to group homes and the Willowbrook story will finally end.

— ANNE SILVERSTEIN