

Long requiem for Willowbrook

By MARY ENGELS

Daily News Staff Writer

Willowbrook's Staten Island Developmental Center, once called "a snake pit" by then Sen. Robert Kennedy, will officially close this week with a series of programs and a special ceremony on Thursday presided over by Gov. Cuomo.

The center, which once housed more than 6,000 mentally retarded and developmentally disabled persons, recently made headlines with the discovery of the body of the missing 12-year-old Downs Syndrome girl, Jennifer Schweiger, buried on the grounds.

James Walsh, executive director of the development center, commented: "It was a shame a place with such a tragic history also had to end in such a tragic manner."

In its place will be the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office.

"It will be the first of its type in the state," said Walsh.

"It will cover all of Staten Island including those who live in group homes or independently, and will provide a wide range of continuum care for the developmentally disabled," he said.

Walsh noted "My responsibility will be to ascertain what is needed for the clients in the cachement area and to insure those services, if not by the state, then by the voluntary agencies that serve the developmentally disabled."



ROOMY kitchen and dining area at Willowbrook's new Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services center. JAMES HUGHES DAILY NEWS

Acree retained

The director explained that the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities had managed to hold on to about 145 to 160 acres. "Part of that is being used for the Richmond Complex, which houses 48 clients in three houses.

"Another part will be used for the Richmond Community Resource Center, which is being named after Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-S.I.) who chairs the State Assembly's Mental Health Committee.

"The dedication of the new center, which will feature a therapeutic Olympic-size pool, will take place Thursday," Walsh said.

"This center will be used for a myriad of day treatment programs and community resources," he said.

"We were fortunate in getting almost double the original acreage asked for, thanks to the efforts of Connelly, the advocacy of the parents and the various volunteer agencies," he said.

A portion of the land also houses the Institute for Basic Research.

"The majority of the property will go to the College of Staten Island, and we will be working with them in developing programs dealing with the problems of the developmentally disabled.

To serve as model

"We hope it will serve as a model nationally," Walsh said, noting that "very few schools in the country deal with the problem at all."

The director added that "popula-

tionwise, Staten Island provides services to over 2,500 clients.

"By 1988 or '89 we expect to have more than 3,000 day treatment slots and some 800 residential beds in the community.

"Those residing in the Richmond Complex are all severely, profoundly retarded and are from Staten Island," he said.

Over the years, since the Willowbrook decree (abolishing the original institution), the majority of its clients have gone back to their local areas or to homes of family or friends. Some went on to start their own homes elsewhere.

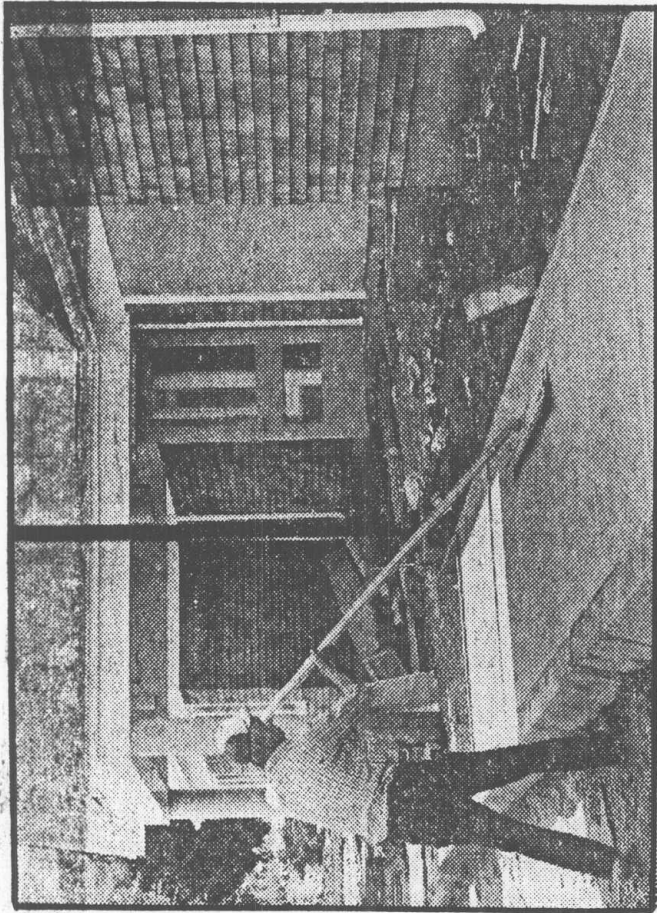
This week's programs will be open to the public for the most part, Walsh said.

On Wednesday from 2 to 4:30 p.m. there will be a panel discussion by former and present Willowbrook directors, at the Institute of Basic Research, 1050 Forest Hill Road. The topic will be what took place during their respective tenures there.

Roundtable slated

On Thursday there will be a roundtable panel from 10 to noon, again at the institute, featuring those involved in obtaining the Willowbrook decree, including former Gov. Hugh Carey.

At 1:15 p.m. the main ceremony marking the closing will take place in the parking lot of Building 10; Gov. Cuomo will officiate. It will be fol-



FINISHING touches are applied to new sidewalk at Willowbrook.

lowed by a reception in Buildings 40 and 41.

On Friday at the Institute of Basic Research, from 9 to 11:30 a.m., there will be a symposium of lawyers discussing the past and future of the center, followed by a luncheon for the center staff from noon to 2 p.m. in Building 10.

Walsh concluded by stating "it will

be a new beginning. One that's long overdue.

"It will give us a chance to show the world how the developmentally disabled citizen should be treated and to show their potential, that in fact, they are and can be contributing members of society as opposed to a drain on our society."

"It will also show that what was once 'a national disgrace' will be a facility that combines not only higher education but a national prototype for a service delivery system to the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled."