

STATEN ISLAND

Willowbrook shut down

'New beginning' is forecast for institution

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In a ceremony looking backward at its infamous past and forward to "a new beginning," Willowbrook formally closed its doors yesterday, a shut-

tered symbol of governmental neglect of the mentally retarded.

"We usually don't close institutions," Gov. Cuomo told an audience of 400 crowded into a tent on the grounds of the Staten Island facility, "but this is an act of celebration, an opening of a whole new era of con-

tinuing care."

The "new era" will see about half of the 380 acres of the former Willowbrook, now called the Staten Island Developmental Center, transferred to the College of Staten Island and the balance to two small care centers. One is the Elizabeth Connelly Community Resource Center for the developmentally disabled and the other is the Richmond Complex, housing for 48 severely and profoundly retarded persons.

Stems from consent decree

The death and rebirth of Willowbrook, which once held the world's largest population of the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled, is the outgrowth of a consent decree signed in 1975 by former Gov. Hugh Carey. The decree, which followed litigation by enraged parents of Willowbrook inmates, promised to phase out the institution and its 6,200 patients in favor of smaller, more hospitable facilities.

Recalling that agreement, Carey, who also spoke at yesterday's ceremony, declared, "As a society of human beings, we must see to it that a Willowbrook never happens again."

Built in the 1940s, Willowbrook and its primitive conditions became a symbol of mistreatment of the mentally infirm in 1965 when the late Sen. Robert Kennedy reported on patients living in filth and dirt "in rooms less comfortable and cheerful than the cages in a zoo." State investigations and a federal court suit followed, urged on by national publicity and television coverage that showed naked children covered with filth and beset by vermin.

Appalling conditions

As late as 1983, the federal Health and Human Services Department called conditions at the institution "appalling."

Cuomo said the state, in the Carey consent decree, "recognized the basic fact that we had ignored the mentally retarded and the developmentally disabled. They are," he said, "destined to work, learn, grow, live, participate, to choose and live life to their full potential, rather than just exist."

In the next four years, the governor said, "I promise to close six more of these centers. We now know we can provide quality care in society and not separate from it."

In yesterday's most poignant incident, former Willowbrook patient Bernard Carabello told the hushed audience, "On behalf of every person who used to live with me in this hell hole, Gov. Carey, we thank you very much for keeping your promise." Turning back to the audience, he pleaded, "Never forget Willowbrook. This must never happen again."

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