

Cuts called threat to care for disabled

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ALBANY — The state's decision to cut 129 positions to balance the budget will jeopardize care for the developmentally disabled, a union official charged yesterday.

Gov. Mario M. Cuomo and the Legislature trimmed \$1 million in care for the mentally retarded and handicapped clients statewide, including abolishing two positions at the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) in Willowbrook.

The cutbacks at the state's nine developmental centers will go into effect Oct. 19.

Rand Connell, president of the New York State Public Employees Federation (PEF), called the state's plan "a leap back into the dark days of ignoring client needs and warehousing the state's neediest citizens."

Connell, who heads the state's largest white-collar union, estimated the reduction in staffing will affect 10,000 clients and their families.

The Office of Mental Health, Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) is actually eliminating 229 positions, mostly mental health nurses and community placement specialists. Some are management employees. But OMRDD would add 100 direct care therapists to work with clients.

At SIDC, a medical specialist and chief housekeeper would be laid off. Neither SIDC director Robert Watkins nor PEF representative Willa Thompson were available for comment yesterday.

Lou Gannon, a spokesman for OMRDD, acknowledged the plan emerged to balance the state bud-

get deficit. Cuomo said the state had to dissolve a projected \$900 million deficit. But the positions are not indispensable because clients are blending into the community, Gannon said.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton, chairwoman of the Mental Health Committee, said she agreed staffing arrangements in OMRDD are not representative of changes caused by census decline, developmental center closure and community residential development.

But she stressed any reduction in clinical staffing should be coupled with a corresponding increase in direct care staff. However, OMRDD is minus 129 positions.

Connell contended the "horrors of Willowbrook" will reappear if the state cuts the positions. "It will signal another long, dark chapter in the odyssey of the state's disadvantaged to obtain consistent, quality care," he said.

Gannon said most of the employees would be relocated within OMRDD or other state agencies. "We'll do everything we can to find them other jobs," he said.