

Remembering Willowbrook's painful past

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It's been 25 years since a media expose begun by the Advance led to the closing of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

Elected officials, service providers, clients and the media gathered at City Hall yesterday to remember the historic lawsuit that closed the facility and ushered in an era of community-based care for the developmentally disabled.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore), who played a central role in overseeing residents as they were moved into the community, said the key lesson of Willowbrook should be that concerned citizens have to remain both vocal and vigilant to make sure a system of warehousing the developmentally disabled is never again reinstated.

"You've got to remain alert, keep fighting to make sure the funds for community-based programs are there," she said.

Mrs. Connelly is the former chairman of the Assembly's Mental Health Committee, a panel that was instrumental in making it possible for former Willowbrook clients to be re-settled in neighborhoods.

Yesterday's ceremony, which included the showing of a recent documentary called "Unforgotten: Twenty-Five Years After Willowbrook," brought back a flood of memories for Mrs. Connelly.

"I recall the first time I visited the facility in January of 1974 when I assumed my Assembly seat," she said. "I was stunned to walk through those halls and see individuals partially naked, some defecating on the floor. It was really shocking. This was a facil-

ity that was only a mile from my home."

When then-state Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas Coughlin visited Willowbrook in the late 1970s, after Mrs. Connelly had set up her office on the grounds, he could hardly restrain his anger at seeing residents just lying around, Mrs. Connelly said.

"He said the people needed training," Mrs. Connelly said. "So they started training programs." She recalled that one of the early methods they used to keep residents focused was to give them M&M's if they paid attention.

Mrs. Connelly said the consent decree that came out of the lawsuit dramatically changed the service landscape for the developmentally disabled.

Today, only 2,815 individuals reside in state developmental centers compared to 27,000 before the conditions at Willowbrook were exposed.

Said City Mental Health Commissioner Neal L. Cohen: "The mental retardation/developmentally disabled community — the clients, the family members, advocates and service providers — was the engine that transformed the entire system. In the years since, the dedication and compassion of these individuals has helped to make mental retardation/developmental disability services progressively more responsive and productive."

Also at the ceremony, former Willowbrook resident Margaret Palladino talked about the day-to-day life in the community.

In the 1970s parents of Willowbrook residents sued the state to obtain proper treatment and humane living conditions. That case that led to the shutdown of the school and the consent decree.

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