

25 years after Willowbrook

■ Anniversary celebration will honor three New York governors for their roles in transforming the system

"... Retarded persons, regardless of the degree of handicapping conditions, are capable of physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth, and ... a certain level of affirmative intervention and programming is necessary if that capacity for growth and development is to be preserved, and regression prevented."

— Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed April 30, 1975

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When Gov. Hugh L. Carey signed the Willowbrook Consent Decree in 1975, New York state triggered a tsunami of national reforms providing safe, attractive, and homey environments with personalized care for the mentally retarded and others with developmental disabilities.

No other governmental act, human services advocates say,



Hugh Carey



Mario Cuomo



George Pataki

has had such a deep impact on American society in such a short period.

"The placement of the developmentally disabled in community residences, the growth of voluntary agencies, the expansion of special education and day programs along with the training of direct care workers, therapists, teachers and administrators in colleges and universities can be linked to the judgment" (or decree), said Henry J. Kennedy, a New Brighton resident who is co-chairing a 25th anniversary celebration of the signing.

"This judgment not only changed the way the developmentally disabled are cared for in New York," he said, "but has had a profound impact throughout the country."

Local and state human service

advocates are planning a day-long symposium — called "Social Justice Has Prevailed: A Conference in Celebration of the Willowbrook Consent Judgment" — to highlight the events that led to the passage of the landmark legislation as well as its effects.

Panel discussions by former Willowbrook residents, parents of former residents, lawyers, government administrators and other human services advocates will focus on public policy issues, including the role of higher education in professional careers in the field.

The event is slated for May 2 at the College of Staten Island, the former site of the Willowbrook State School, which became the national catch phrase for the warehousing of the mentally retarded in inhumane conditions.

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