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Outpatient program for mentally ill ordered halted

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ALBANY — State officials, faced with a watchdog agency's report that the state's outpatient program for mentally ill adults lacks direction and accountability, yesterday ordered a halt on expansion of the program.

State Mental Health Commissioner Richard Surles said it seemed "prudent" to impose the moratorium until a study is done on the nation's largest state-run outpatient program. The moratorium will stretch into 1990.

Clarence Sundram, chairman of the state Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled, said Surles is anticipating the release of his commission's critical report next week.

"There is a real problem with the focus and direction of the program the way it currently exists," Sundram said.

The state spends nearly \$800 million a year on 950 separate agencies that care for more than 250,000 mentally ill adults. There are more than 100 applications on file for expansions, said Robert Spoor, spokesman for the mental health office.

Sundram said his agency found

price differences of between 500 and 2000 percent on what separate outpatient programs were paying for the same services.

Most programs basically deliver clinical services to patients but do little to teach them or train them for jobs, he said. State, local and independent outpatient programs also compete for the most "compliant" mental patients instead of the more difficult ones, he said.

"Patients with more complex needs . . . tend not to get served by anybody," Sundram said.

Spoor said he didn't know if the moratorium announcement came as a direct result of Sundram's commission report.

"I don't know if there's a cause and effect relationship," Spoor said. "I'm sure he (Surles) is aware of the report. But I also know he's trying to change the system and make it more accountable."

Surles said the program is governed by a "patchwork of regulations" and it is "questionable whether they adequately reflect the system's new directions or the changing needs of the people needing outpatient services."