

October 21, 1948

Damaged—and Damned

It could happen to anyone.

You have several healthy children. Then inexplicably, the next one is born a mental defective. A mongoloid idiot or a microcephalic, whose blurred reactions warn you that he will never be normal.

What do you do?

Send your baby away to a private institution where he will receive adequate training and care? Private institutions are expensive. Some charge as much as \$300 a month.

Send the child to a state institution? But the state is defaulting on the care of mental defectives under five. Space is tight, beds are few.

Call a city hospital to take your baby away? Some 80 mentally damaged children are already lying in our wards, deprived of sun and exercise, subjected to cross infection from the physically ill youngsters bedded nearby.

What do you do?

Many parents revert to medievalism. They exile the child to a back room, hide it away and pray that the neighbors won't discover the secret tenant, living his dim days out in virtual abandonment.

Hospital Commissioner Bernecker estimates that there are "at least 800 mental defectives under five who should be institutionalized." Most are, instead, closeted away from the special training they need to learn simple habits which could faintly pattern their clouded experience.

Who's to blame?

The heartbroken parents, many of whom have never been taught that bearing defective children usually casts no reflection on their own mental soundness?

The city, which is not charged with any over-all legal responsibility?

Or the state, which is required by law to care for New York's mentally ill?

The responsibility clearly rests in Albany. But it was not until February, 1946, that the state finally stopped bickering with the city over the small unfortunates and began to piece together a program for mental defectives under five.

Five state schools for epileptics were opened to the children, but these quickly filled to capacity.

More space turned up when the Army began to move out of Staten Island's Halloran Hospital, now known as Willowbrook State School.

But Willowbrook, of necessity, has had to restrict its intake to a scant 50 children under five, and none under a year.

It's the old, familiar and inexcusable story. Insufficient personnel and equipment. Both take money, more than the state has seen fit to appropriate.

At Willowbrook, adult defectives clumsily care for the children and five, shining buildings stand by, empty, unused, for want of state funds.

What can be done?

Post Home News reporter Joseph Kahn indicated some of the answers in his series on mental defectives, which ended yesterday.

Social workers from the state schools can screen the waiting lists of young mental defectives, being careful to grant the most urgent cases top priority on the state's handful of beds.

State institutions can send their teachers into the community to work with families, teaching them to care for defective children in the home.

But these are only stop-gaps against the day when the state will do what it must do—finance a full-scale program, complete with new buildings and highly skilled, well paid workers, to care for mentally defective youngsters.