

Halloran Closing

With shocking suddenness, it was announced yesterday that Halloran VA Hospital is to be closed as a veterans facility in June and the institution turned over to the state for the use of the expanding Willowbrook State School for mental defectives.

That's a heavy blow to the entire community, veterans and non-veterans.

The closing of Halloran was expected, but not so soon. While it was known in some quarters that the VA didn't consider the Willowbrook layout too favorably, negotiations were being carried on only two months ago to extend the lease on the property for at least two years. The federal veterans administrator, Carl R. Gray Jr., and Governor Dewey met in Manhattan to discuss that very matter.

Now the VA is to move out because of "the state's pressing need."

This is no minor decision. It will affect virtually every phase of borough life. The decision is equivalent to ordering a shutdown of a large industry as well as a major health agency.

Hundreds of families will be affected...merchants...and, by no means the least, the veterans in need of medical care.

Many are the questions prompted by this decision. Some call for an explanation by veterans officials in Washington. Others require a wait-and-see attitude before an answer can be supplied. Some can't be answered.

It's still too early to know all of the VA's plans, but some facts are known.

VETERANS' CARE—Patients now at Halloran are to be transferred to Brooklyn, Peekskill, Bronx or Batavia facilities. That isn't as simple as it sounds. The new facility at Fort Hamilton isn't completed because Army Engineers still occupy part of the site; the facility at Peekskill isn't expected to be ready until May. That means tight scheduling of transfers if the June deadline is to be met.

Competent observers note that hospitals absorbing Halloran's caseload will have to adjust their staffs, probably enlarge them, to meet the new demand.

And what about Staten Island veterans who need care?

After years of finding it close at hand, they will now have to travel many miles even for simple out-patient clinic work.

This factor is one of the most important. A VA facility is being snatched from a community with a population of 200,000 and no easy access to other veterans facilities.

EMPLOYMENT

This matter will also bring many disruptions in community life. Employees, whenever possible, are to be given a chance at openings in other installations. But that will mean moving unless the reassignment is to some facility conveniently located within the city. Many employees had only recently purchased homes and settled their families in this borough.

It's going to mean severe readjustment for many individuals and many families.

There will be employment possibilities at Willowbrook State School, in addition to those at non-Island veterans facilities. But there will be a definite time lag between the closing of Halloran as a veterans facility and the expansion of the entire institution under state control.

Months will be required for a change-over in the buildings alone. Then, too, the administrative set-up will have to be organized and the mental patients assigned to Willowbrook State School.

ECONOMICS—It doesn't take a wizard at finance to figure out what the closing at Halloran is going to mean to the community at large.

The annual payroll at Halloran amounts to nearly \$6,800,000. Total expenditures in this borough, including payroll, amount to \$8,000,000.

Halloran has one of the largest, if not the largest payroll in the borough.

While Willowbrook State School will have an expanding payroll, it's not likely that it will ever be equal to Halloran's at the present time. The kind of treatment given is a major factor in the difference.

The Veterans Administration cannot be blamed for the decision to move out at this time. Obviously the state refused to extend its lease. The VA, as tenant, has no choice.

Officials will tell you that the VA hoped to retain Halloran until the proposed facility was erected by Army Engineers on Manhattan's East Side, between 23rd and 25th streets.

A gradual change was hoped for. Time in which to make careful adjustments. Time in which to close out Halloran slowly.

But it isn't working out that way. Reports say first patient transfers may occur within a week. The weeks are few for such a big shutdown.

Pleas for VA retention of Halloran will get nowhere. The VA will no longer have an Island facility. But the VA will have to make other provisions for borough veterans.