

MENTAL HYGIENE MEMO

Clear Workers of Abuse Charge At Willowbrook State School

Dr. Arthur W. Pense, Acting Commissioner of the State Department of Mental Hygiene, who was directed by Governor Averell Harriman to report on charges that a child was abused at Willowbrook State School, has submitted his report to the Governor.

The report pays tribute to the capable job done by employees of Mental Hygiene Department institutions, and finds the charges about the girl unproved. The girl is Catherine DeVole, age 5. The charges were made by her parents.

The girl was admitted to the school last year at the request of her parents.

"The record shows that she required a great amount of personal care and attention to keep her clean and to feed her," Dr. Pense related. "Sometimes she required spoon feeding and at all times assistance with her meals.

"The child was sick on several occasions . . . and actually spent more than half of the time in the hospital building. The family was informed on two occasions that she was considered to be critically ill. The parents were also informed when the child developed measles. They visited her on May 15 for the first time since January. They requested permission to remove her from the institution. She was discharged in their custody after her medical condition was explained to them. While at the school there they made no complaints of physical abuse.

Allegations Checked Carefully

The allegations that the child had been physically abused were checked into very carefully. A physician employed by the department in its hospital, and who was given no information regarding the child's condition at Willowbrook, examined her at the home of her parents on May 17, less than 48 hours after she had left the Willowbrook institution. . . . (He found several marks on her) . . . none characteristic of welts or bruises which might result from abuse.

"The record shows one instance when the child was found by school personnel to have some bruises. These were investigated very carefully at the time, and were believed to be the result of the child's over-activity when she was in a disturbed tantrum-like state.

Given Every Attention

"More than 400 employees who had cared for the child in one capacity or another during her residence in the school were questioned under oath. No evidence could be elicited that this child had been mistreated or abused.

"On the contrary, there are many indications that sincere efforts were made by those caring for her to give her every needed attention and, as one of the employees stated, 'as much affection as we could to make her happy.'

"The child had periods of attacks of diarrhea and colds, and one attack of measles. It appears clear that no pains have been spared to identify all cases of illness promptly, isolate them carefully and treat them fully. . . .

"The medical record as it stands, supplies adequate explanation for all aspects of the DeVole child's condition, including loss of weight, loss of hair and tendency to skin lesions and abrasions.

"The element of unpleasant surprise which played so large a part in the reaction of the parents was due to the fact that they had not fully grasped the seriousness of her illness and they did not realize what effects such illness might have. . . .

Staff Eases Adjustment Period

"In the institution the child must become adjusted to a new environment which even under ideal conditions can never be the same as home. The surroundings are different, many unfamiliar persons suddenly enter his previously limited world, the food is different, and even the bed he sleeps in is strange. Even with all his limitations he is likely to be homesick. This is to be expected, and the institution staff who are concerned with the care of these little ones are prepared to alleviate it to every possible extent. With severely retarded children, the difficulty of this task is self-evident. . . .

"The first few months of a child's institutional life are difficult. . . . Only through the provision of sympathetic care for the child and emotional support for the parents are several hundred children received in our schools annually and helped to make a satisfactory adjustment.

"The department schools have brought happiness to thousands of children and comfort to their families. . . .

"Among the unfortunate side effects of the publicity attendant upon matters such as the DeVole case, is the anxiety created in the minds of parents of the some 3,000 children at Willowbrook who have found it necessary to seek State assistance. There have been expressions of confidence in the school received from them which have been encouraging to the employees devoting themselves to the care of these handicapped children. . . .

"The personnel requirements of the schools for the mentally defective are constantly becoming greater owing to a shift in the types of the admissions. . . . This change is from a population composed of a sizeable number of patients with considerable capacity for self-help, to one with a high percentage requiring complete personal care. At the Willowbrook State School almost half of the patients are under 10 years of age and three-quarters are in the category known as 'the severely retarded,' all of whom require varying degrees of help.

"The increasing number of helpless patients coming to the schools indicates the desirability of reviewing staffing requirements for these institutions."