

Death Triggers Probe Of Willowbrook School

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WILLOWBROOK, S.I. — The operations of Willowbrook State School, the world's largest school for retarded children, are about to be investigated in the wake of the death May 14 of a 10-year-old boy who was scalded in a shower.

District Attorney John M. Braisted will probe the school's administration next month before the Richmond County Grand Jury. The scalding death was the second in six months, and the third accidental death in the past year.

The school houses 6,054 retarded children, whose afflictions range from relatively mild retardation to severe cases for which there is virtually no hope for cure.

The school occupies the old Halloran Veterans Hospital buildings. There are more than 30 buildings on the property; 24 of them house patients. The operation is vast and complex, and when problems arise they are equally complex.

Plumbing "Antiquated"

A survey of the school's plumbing which began prior to the recent death indicates a need for large-scale changes in a system described by one source as "antiquated."

Dr. Jack Hammond, administrator of the school, said much work will be needed, including "some wholesale replacements, in order to correct the

plumbing. Valves will be installed to prevent old shower fixtures from suddenly spraying scalding water on children.

According to Hammond, who took over the school less than a year ago, the key problems are crowding and staff shortages—problems, he said, which cannot be properly solved on the school's \$13 million operating budget.

The overcrowding became so acute that Hammond closed the school to admissions from October last year to March of this year. At present, many children sleep in beds literally inches from other children. The beds are so close in some areas they have to be moved to be made up.

1,500 Ward Attendants

The school employs more than 1,500 ward attendants. Their effectiveness is reduced by the fact that they work a five-day week, three shifts a day.

Thus, a ward of 60 to 70 children will have perhaps four attendants during the day, three in the evening and one or two during the night.

In critical areas, however, there are as many as two attendants for each five children.

The labor shortage is com-

pounded by the lack of direct bus service from Elizabeth, Newark and Jersey City. Approximately a third of the staff of attendants live in these cities. Often, when the driver of a car pool is sick, the riders in the pool can't get to work.

The school is negotiating with Public Service Coordinated Transport and other lines, but so far it has had no success in getting buses to run during hours when shifts are changing.

Were Given Raise

The attendants recently received a raise, jumping top salaries after five years' service from \$4,432 to \$4,670. Starting salaries are less than \$4,000 a year.

"The vast majority of employees at the school are dependable, hard-working, conscientious people," said Hammond. "They work under very difficult conditions. It really takes people with dedication."

But dedication is not enough. Hammond concluded after a lengthy study that the school needed 440 more ward attendants, 14 teachers and 24 more recreational and occupational therapists.

He requested budget funds for 200 more attendants and the teachers and therapists. None of the requests were granted in the budget, however.

A short-range answer may be found tomorrow at a supplemental budget hearing in Albany, at which approval for the needed funds may be given.

Research Unit Due

The long-range hope lies in prevention. To this end the state is building a \$7 million research institute at Willowbrook School which is expected to begin operations in September, 1966.

Mrs. Shirley Epstein, president of Willowbrook Chapter, Benevolent Society for Retarded Children of the New York State Association for Retarded Children, is "begging" the public as well as state officials to support the school with more money.

She scored public apathy toward the plight of the children and their families, and sent a wire to State Controller Arthur Levitt saying she will hold him "morally responsible" for any future tragedies of the kind that took place this month.

She said the school has many things to be proud of, especially its facilities for retarded infants. "But the size of the school is something we do not boast of. We say it with tears in our eyes," she declared.

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WILLOWBROOK BID

The State Department of Public Works this week announced the construction of seven play shelters at Willowbrook State School, Willowbrook. The Saron Construction Corp. was the lowest of six bidders for the work with \$44,950. It is one of six projects announced for various parts of the state. Contracts have not yet been awarded.