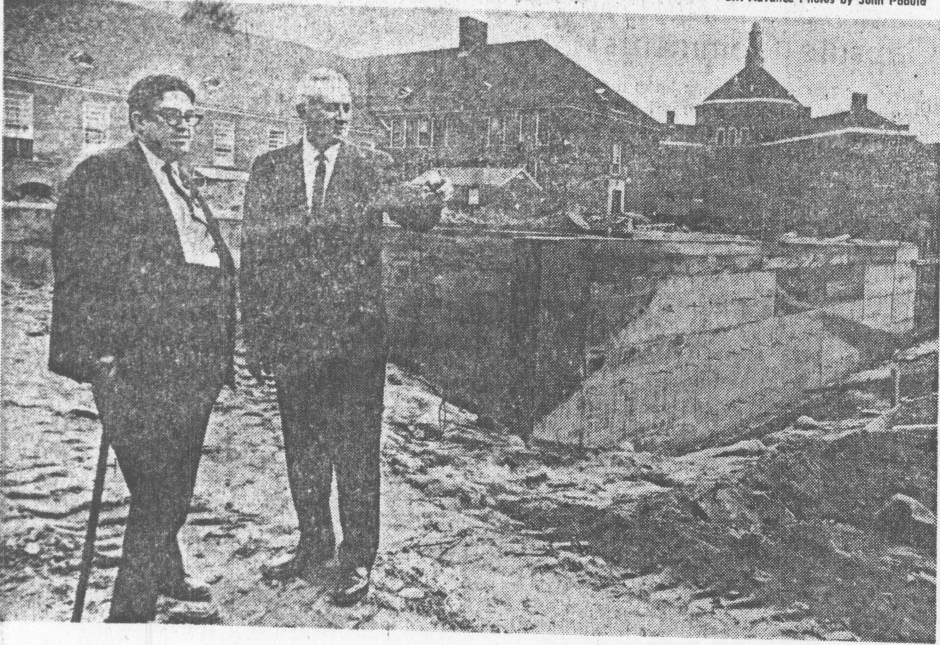


(over)

Dr. Jack Hammond director, answers questions during a press conference called to answer accusations of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy about the "intolerable" conditions at Willowbrook State School.

S.I. Advance Photos by John Padula



Dr. Hammond, right, and Ernest C. Palcic, senior business officer, point out construction underway at Willowbrook to add additional classrooms to its school building.

Senator's School Blast Draws Mixed Reactions

By JULIE SUMMERS
Reaction from officials and parents to Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's criticism of Willowbrook State School was both critical and favorable today.
Parents of patients at the school have one thing to say, while others in the "those who know" group say another.
Kennedy, who visited the school unannounced described what he had seen in a statement prepared for the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation.

state of things here, but he's not having much luck."
Mrs. Ellis contended that "it is politics; you have to go through so much red tape," that any action finally taken is negligible.
"I have often said that the place is a snake pit," she commented. "The board has tried to correct conditions, but we don't get any cooperation from the Department of Mental Hygiene at all."
She agreed with Kennedy's

statement that there is understaffing at the institution.
"Of course, there is the problem of understaffing; also of not proper pay," she said. "The staff numbers are so small that the children cannot be taken care of adequately."
* * *
C. ERNEST SMITH, chairman of the Board of Visitors, disagreed with the senator and Mrs. Ellis on most points.
"I'll admit that conditions are
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Among his statements about the conditions at the Staten Island institution were assertions that there are overcrowding and understaffing, children "without exercise, appetite or strength," and many living in filth and rags.
* * *
ACCORDING to Mrs. Jerome Ellis, a member of the school's Board of Visitors, Kennedy speaks the truth.
"I agree heartily with everything he said," she remarked. "The conditions at the school are terrible. Dr. (Jack) Hammond (director of the institution) came in last year under intolerable conditions. He is trying very hard to improve the

The first shock waves of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's blast at conditions under which the retarded live in state institutions shook the schools he described—Willowbrook and Rome State Schools. The Staten Island facility was particularly singled out for withering criticism.
The full text of his message before the meeting in the Bronx of the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation and Physically Handicapped added up to a much wider indictment for the "intolerable" situation.
"At the outset," Kennedy

What RFK Said:
began, "I want to make clear that all of us bear full responsibility for these people and for the lives they lead!"
He went on to say: "The recognized standards for these institutions are here in a pamphlet of the American Association on Mental Deficiency. You can open it to almost any page and measure another way in which we fail to meet these standards."
* * *
"BUT BECAUSE we know so much—because we know how much can be done for the re-
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alternative to this was use night jackets. Without tranquilizers, some could butt their brains out against a wall," he declared. He denied the charge that younger patients were thrown in with older ones, but conceded this was done "really" in the past "when the patient represented a danger to those his own age."

The young-looking patients who Kennedy saw with older men were actually "immature appearing," Hammond maintained.

HE TOOK the newsmen on a short tour of the grounds, starting with a visit to one of the buildings for children under 5, where Kennedy had visited on Sept. 1.

Some children were at play, while others, spastic in their movements, were tied by devices to cribs.

The room, a sea of white crib sheets, was clean and bright and a dozen or so youngsters were playing in a side area.

A hydrocephalic girl sat in a wheelchair. She told reporters that her name was Diane and that it was her birthday. But most of the children couldn't talk and were able to utter only noises.

Spastic children rocked back and forth, their limbs a blur of movement.

"Some children can't have toys," Hammond explained. "If they're soft, they'll put them in their mouth and actually choke on them."

Others, he said would break heavier toys and use them as weapons.

THE SENATOR visited on a "bleak, overcast, damp morning," Hammond said, and made rounds of buildings after children who had been out playing were brought in for lunch.

He said Kennedy was "mistaken" in many of the allegations, such as the institution's not having a "certified pediatrician." There is one specialist and five other full-time physicians assigned to the buildings for children under 5, he said.

Dr. Hammond said that brutality was rare and that, "on the rare occasion that an employe slapped a patient," he was dealt with through administrative procedure.

There are 58 Willowbrook children who work in homes as domestics or in industry under a program to prepare them for life outside, he explained.

They receive a minimum wage of 75 cents an hour for domestics and a training wage of 94 cents an hour in industry, he said.

HE DENIED that children had to walk over beds to get to their own, as Kennedy claimed but acknowledged that in

crowded," he asserted, "but the overcrowding has been reduced considerably in the past few years. The rest of what Sen. Kennedy said is absolutely untrue.

"In my opinion," he continued, "he saw the indoor recreation rooms empty because it was summer and most of the children were outdoors. Usually the merry-go-round and the slides (which Sen. Kennedy claimed were empty of children) get good play from the patients."

Parents tended to take exception to Kennedy's remarks and backed themselves up with such statements as "it's better here than at other places" and "the children are always clean."

MRS. BRUCE PETERSEN, whose 6-year-old daughter has been at the Island school for three years, declared: "I have to agree that they are understaffed and overpopulated. But in the infant building where my

unbelievable how well the children are cared for."

Mrs. Petersen explained that the child is immobile and is confined to bed, but "every time I visit her, she is clean. Her skin and hair are kept beautifully."

"I'm up there every weekend," she added, "and although I can't speak for the children in the other buildings, I know that in the infant ward there's nothing the youngsters don't have. There are bikes, toys — anything they can use, they have. They have at least as much as they could get at home."

"I only thank God we have places like Willowbrook to aid children like mine who cannot be cared for at home," she said.

SALVATORE SCARCELLA, whose son has been at Willowbrook for about 10 years, had a basis of comparison for his remarks.

"My son was in the Wassaic State School in upstate New

What RFK Said:

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tarded—there can be no excuse for inaction. What we can do, we must do—to work with these people not to what we think is the limit of their ability, but to the very limit of our ability to help them fulfill their potential. . .

"But much more must be done; the time is now; the burden is ours. In the year 1965, that such conditions such as those that I saw exist in this great state is a reproach to us all."

"Reaction to Kennedy's vivid depiction of 'what shocked and saddened him' was not limited to officials of the state Mental Hygiene Department."

District Attorney John M. Braisted Jr., who has for months been conducting a grand jury investigation into Willowbrook, said he "was aware" of most of what Kennedy had to say.

Braisted, who said he was about halfway through the probe which was prompted by three accidental deaths, held out the possibility that he may invite the senator to testify before the jury "to see if he has anything material to contribute."

The jury convenes Sept. 22.

DR. HAROLD H. BERMAN of 800 Victory Blvd., Silver Lake, who preceded Dr. Jack Hammond as director at Willowbrook, said the institution had broken new ground in treating the retarded.

"When we started," he said,

"retardation was a dirty word. We brought the problem of retardation out into the sunlight."

Berman said that it was "unrealistic to think you can build a separate institution for each child" and that professionals in the field "have to work with the tools they have."

He said that when he resigned in January 1964, he left a "going institution."

KENNEDY, in a reference to Dr. Hammond, said that the Willowbrook director had recognized the need for training personnel, teachers and therapists, but had been turned down by the budget division.

The senator said the state agency, "while willing to provide additional custodial personnel, has not been willing to provide the necessary program help."

Kennedy outlined a program for achieving improvements that included obtaining help from the federal government, using volunteers and student help and on the job training programs.

The critical problems must be met, Kennedy said.

"We cannot tolerate a new snake pit in New York."

York for five years before we brought him here," he said "and the conditions at Willowbrook are much better than they were there."

"Up there, the smell was so bad that I couldn't even eat a sandwich in the building. I had to go outside."

"At Willowbrook," he said, "it's clean. Maybe they don't have much help, but they take good care of my son. I don't see anything wrong with it. He is nice and clean every time I visit and he gets a haircut once a month."

MRS. ISRAEL EPSTEIN, president of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, the parents' organization at Willowbrook, said Sen. Kennedy spoke the truth.

"The parents have been complaining about these things for quite a long time," she said, "but conditions won't improve until the unrealistic pay scale currently in effect is improved."

"No pediatrician is going to take the money he can make at the school over the money he could earn in private practice. Neither is a speech or hearing therapist."

She reiterated Mrs. Ellis' statement that conditions were terrible when Dr. Hammond arrived at the institution. "He has been a big help in correcting some things already, such as the closure of admissions," she said.

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