

Kennedy: Intolerable Child Aid

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Sen. Robert F. Kennedy charged that conditions in two New York State schools for the mentally retarded were "intolerable." He made his detailed and blistering attack before a joint state legislative committee holding hearings on the subject in the Bronx.

Reactions to the Senator's charges ranged from indignation over conditions in state institutions by the committee chairman to angry charges of "the usual garbage" by a State Mental Hygiene Department official.

The Senator walked into the hearing room at the Concourse Plaza Hotel while the eight members of the committee were taking testimony about deaf children from a Catholic priest. The session immediately halted while legislators greeted the tanned and peeling Senator and then offered him the lectern for a 12-page indictment of two of this state's largest schools for the mentally retarded, Willowbrook on Staten Island and the Rome State School in Rome.

"I would not want any

"There are many—far too many—living in filth and dirt, their clothing in rags, in rooms less comfortable and cheerful than the cages in which we put animals in a zoo."

—Sen. Robert Kennedy

"It is the usual garbage and it's getting close to Nov. 2, you know."

—Dr. James A. Brussel of State Department of Mental Hygiene.

child of mine or any relative of mine to spend an hour there," the Senator said of conditions in the two schools.

Sen. Kennedy said he had recently visited the two institutions and that he had been "shocked and saddened" by what he saw. He listed the following conditions:

OVERCROWDING— "Wards built for 40 patients have 80 or more . . . Beds literally cover the entire floor, with three inches between them . . . Patients in Willowbrook must walk on other patients' beds to get to their own."

NO TOYS OR TRAINING— "There is . . . no room in such a ward for personal possessions—for any shred of individuality—for a toy or some clothing, or a book . . . I have not observed (training and educational programs at either of these schools."

SMELLS AND DISEASE— "And there are many . . . living in filth and dirt, their clothing in rags, in rooms less comfortable and cheerful than the cages in which we put animals in a zoo . . . there are no civil

liberties for those put in the cells of Willowbrook—living amidst brutality and human excrement and intestinal disease."

PERSONNEL SHORTAGES— "The director of Willowbrook . . . has requested a total of 69 schoolteachers; he presently has 33. He has requested 97 occupational therapists; he has 11."

The Senator also said there had been "five unnatural deaths" among Willowbrook inmates in the last year. One patient, he said, was scalded to death in a shower by another retarded patient. Another victim was killed by an older, more capable boy who had been put in with slower youths as punishment, according to Sen. Kennedy.

Escorting reporters through his crowded facilities late in the afternoon, Willowbrook's director, Dr. Jack Hammond, angrily accused Sen. Kennedy of making a "sensational exposé (that) was unfair to patients, their families, the Department (of Mental Hygiene), the Governor and myself."

Dr. Hammond denied the Senator's charges that there is no staff pediatrician at Willowbrook. He said there is one, plus five other full-time doctors with pediatric experience.

The director said Sen. Kennedy had looked at Willowbrook hurriedly and with the eyes of a layman. "You must keep in mind that there are extremely retarded individuals here who cannot feed, bathe or use the bathroom by themselves."

He did not deny that Sen. Kennedy's charges were true, but said that the Senator's statements were "exaggerated" for political purposes.

The Senator made it clear that he was not laying the blame on the directors of the two state schools. (Sen. Kennedy's 45-year-old sister, Rosemary, has been cared for at St. Coletta's Home in Jefferson, Wis., for the last 22 years. She was born mentally retarded.)

But he charged that by not laying out programs for student supervision of children in its care, the state was missing hundreds of thousands of dollars in Federal aid now available to support training and educational programs in state schools and hospitals.

State Sen. Harry Kraf, D., Bronx, chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation and Physical Handicap, after hearing the Senator's remarks, said, "I am going to delve into it. These are outrageous conditions."

In Albany, Dr. Christopher F. Terrence, acting commis-

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sloner of the State Department of Mental Hygiene, commenting on Mr. Kennedy's remarks, cited new appropriations for expanding state facilities.

Dr. Terrence cited an increase of \$5 million in current appropriations for state facilities and said that money would pay salaries for 1,700 new personnel. He also said \$500 million had been appropriated for mental hospital construction, of which 40 per cent would go for facilities for the retarded, and he said he would unveil "in the next few days" a master plan for mentally retarded in the state.

But Sen. Kennedy cited a

U. S. grant of \$18,000 to the Rome school. He said the money still sits in Albany tied up by the Mental Hygiene Department. Willowbrook also has an application in for Federal funds but it has not yet been approved.

A sharper reaction to the Senator's testimony came from Dr. James A. Brussel in charge of the New York City office of the State Department of Mental Hygiene. He said, "It is the usual garbage and it's getting close to Nov. 2, you know." He also cited new facilities under construction in Suffolk County, in New York City and at three other New York sites.

At the end of his testimony, Sen. Kennedy deserted his text to make a few personal suggestions about care of the mentally retarded.

He said the institutions are

too large and should be broken up into smaller facilities nearer the communities they serve. He said dormitories should be limited to about 30 instead of the current 100 and more inmates and he suggested putting partitions in current structures to give patients more privacy. (Willowbrook has more than 6,000 inmates; Rome more than 5,000. The seven state institutions for the mentally retarded have a total population of more than 26,000).

Sen. Kennedy said patients should be called by their names or by some other appellation than "Boy!" and he thought they should have their own clothes and toys. He said somebody should take care of the smell in several facilities, which, he said was "overwhelming." The Senator also wanted unlocked doors

and less of straitjackets to restrain the unruly. He said something should be done about the inevitable "homosexuality and self-mutilation" rampant in the institutions.

But it was clear that what really outraged the junior senator from New York was that he believed nobody seemed to be doing anything constructive—that the state was providing minimal custodial care and leaving human beings to slowly rot and then die without having lived at all.