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SCHOOL DEFENDS CARE OF RETARDED

Head of Willowbrook Board Decries Kennedy Charge

By JOHN SIGLEY

Senator Robert F. Kennedy's charge that the state does not properly care for mentally defective children was denounced as "a lot of hogwash" yesterday by the president of the Board of Visitors to the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island.

Willowbrook was one of the two state institutions that Senator Kennedy visited before making his strongly phrased attack last week. In testimony before the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation, he said:

"There are no civil liberties for those put in the cells of Willobrook—living amidst brutality and human excrement and intestinal disease."

The head of Willowbrook's Board of Visitors, C. Ernest Smith, a Staten Island lawyer, acknowledged yesterday that the institution was overcrowded and understaffed.

"But the rest of what Kennedy said is ridiculous—it's political, that's all," said Mr. Smith.

He said the Senator's 90-minute tour last Wednesday was too brief for a full understanding of Willowbrook's operations.

"He talks about the merry-go-round not being used," Mr. Smith noted. "Well, he was there at lunchtime, when the children were eating."

Mr. Smith said the Board of Visitors, an eight-member, unsalaried group appointed to seven-year terms by the Governor, held monthly meetings at Willowbrook. Its last meeting was "around the end of August," he said, and the members made a tour of inspection after their formal session.

The lawyer said his board had appealed to the Department of Mental Hygiene for more personnel.

"About six month ago, they authorized Dr. [Jack] Hammond [director of Willowbrook] to hire more staff, but we haven't been able to fill the jobs."

Mr. Smith called Dr. Hammond "very capable."

The board president also noted that it was under continual pressure from the Benevolent Society, an organization composed of the parents of inmates at Willowbrook.

"They're on our backs all the time," he said.

Meanwhile, the families of retarded youngsters spoke out forcefully on both sides of the growing public controversy.

Glen Emery of Manhassett, L. I., who runs a Manhattan travel agency, called The New York Times to protest Senator Kennedy's charge.

Mr. Emery explained that his 4-year-old son, Thomas, is a Mongoloid patient at Willowbrook.

"I can't say enough about the staff out there," Mr. Emery said. "Their devotion is keeping my boy alive."

Mr. Emery said that because of the age-limit at the school Thomas could not be admitted to Willowbrook until he was 2 years old. Until then, he said, he paid $200 a month to keep the child in a private hospital on Long Island.

"He was underweight and continually regurgitating. He was slowly dying," the father said.

"But I wish you could see him today at Willowbrook. He's roly-poly and happy. I couldn't do what those people are doing for him—I don't have the emotional makeup."

Mr. Emery added: "I wish Kennedy would go climb another mountain."

The other side of the dispute was voiced by a Brooklyn widow who called her daughter "an adult-child." The 26-year-old girl, also a Mongoloid, lives with her at home.

At one point, when she was seeking employment, the mother said, she decided she would have to commit her daughter to a state institution.

"I began checking them over, one by one," she said. "Finally, I decided I'd rather see her dead than in one of those places. They were more humane in medieval times. At least they gave them clean straw to sleep on."

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