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Halpern hits defenders of state schools

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By Gene Goshorn

State officials who defend conditions at state schools for the mentally retarded are "defending the indefensible," County Mental Health Commissioner Abraham L. Halpern said last night.

Dr. Halpern agreed with Sen. Robert F. Kennedy that conditions at Rome and Willowbrook State Schools for the retarded are "intolerable." The senator was very kind," Halpern said.

Halpern said the state schools are "very overcrowded" and recommended that "no more retarded people be sent there" until conditions are corrected.

Halpern, who expects state criticism for backing Kennedy, criticized state mental health officials for "acting like they are being personally insulted." These officials instead should be seconding Kennedy's recommendations for improving conditions, Halpern, a psychiatrist, said.

Kennedy said in testimony Thursday before a joint legislative committee: "There are many — far too many — (retarded) 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."

"Christopher F. Terrence, acting state mental hygiene commissioner, commented later than he has "long been aware of the difficulties faced by the state schools as a result of overcrowding and understaffing . . ."

Terrence traced the problem's

to the fact the state is spending only \$6.50 a day per child for care at the schools.

At Rome, where there are more than 5,000 mentally retarded, director Dr. Charles Greenberg said Kennedy spent only 80 minutes there and would have been "more understanding" if he had stayed longer.

"Had he stayed longer," Halpern said, "he would have been even more critical." Halpern noted that Kennedy's 45-year-old sister, Rosemary, has been

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Halpern backs H. K.

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in a home for the retarded 22 years.

At Willowbrook, where there are more than 6,000 inmates, director Dr. Jack Hammond accused Kennedy of making a "sensational expose (that) was unfair to patients, their families the Department (of Mental Hygiene), the governor and myself."

Halpern said Hammond was even more critical than was Kennedy before he became the school boss.

Halpern declared that many people are missing the points Kennedy was trying to make in his appearance before the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation and the Physically Handicapped.

"Kennedy said shortcomings at the schools are not due to one man or one administrator," Halpern stated, "and he said the remedy lies with all of us."

"This is the key because Hammond, Greenberg and Terrence are all acting like they are being personally insulted and that's where they're making a mistake."

"Kennedy is bringing to light devastating conditions so things Greenberg, Hammond and Terrence say they want can come about."

"Instead of commenting on Kennedy's recommendations, they (state officials) are saying how well they're doing; how we're only 50 years behind the times now instead of 100 years."

"Kennedy's recommendations might bring New York State up to date. So instead of sitting on their laurels, these officials should be agreeing with Kennedy."

Kennedy said the state is missing hundreds of thousands of dollars in federal aid to support training and educational programs in state schools and hospitals.

He said students should be hired to augment professional recreation staff. He urged that other nonprofessional peo-

ple be drawn into the program.

Kennedy said present institutions are too large and impersonal and should be broken up into smaller units. Dormitories should be made smaller.

The state has plans to build seven 1,000-bed schools throughout the state, including one in Syracuse to replace the Syracuse State School.

Dr. Julius Cohen, a Syracuse University associate professor in special education, today agreed with Kennedy and Halpern that smaller institutions are needed.

"Conditions such as Kennedy describes can occur in large institutions," Cohen said. "New York State unfortunately seems committed to large institutions."

Columbia University graduate Cohen said he worked in a New Jersey institution with 250 severely retarded children "and it was several years before we knew we had each kid programmed as he should be. And that was only 250 children."

Kennedy complained about a lack of recreation and rehabilitation programs in Rome and Willowbrook.

Cohen and Halpern said "part of the problem is that mental retardation is regarded as medical. One has to be a physician to direct a school."

Cohen said he has special education to deal with retardation and has been working in this field since the 1940s. Yet he said he couldn't be the director tarded.

Halpern said "New York State will continue to be behind times until it opens up (school) administrative posts to the most highly qualified people instead of restricting it to physicians and psychiatrists."

Halpern said conditions at the Syracuse State School for Mental Retarded are not as bad as they are at Rome because, in his words, the Syracuse school "ignores" a state law which requires that it accept severely retarded people."

Amen!

