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Specialist Brands Gouverneur Hospital 'Old and Rotten'

By FELIX KESSLER

A specialist intimately familiar with Gouverneur Hospital stated unequivocally today that the 67-year-old building was unfit for continued use as an institution housing mentally retarded children. "It's an old, rotten building,"

he said. "It should be torn down."

This man cannot be identified. He spoke freely to the World-Telegram but this newspaper is withholding his name. He has a thorough insider's knowledge of Gouverneur's program and its problems. He praised generously the

medical and physical care that the 208 young mentally and physically handicapped children receive at Gouverneur, but he condemned the building in no uncertain terms.

"They should have torn it down years ago," he said. The expert said that the young children housed at

Gouverneur, an overflow from the almost 700 patients at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, are being deprived of fresh air at the Lower East Side institution.

The rusty, ancient balconies jutting the five-story building's rear wards are "unsafe," he charged.

The specialist bluntly denied an assertion by Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook and Gouverneur, that children regularly are taken outside on balconies "in nice weather."

"Not true," he said. "Not once in the past year were children taken out for air on any of these balconies,"

he said. "The children just do not receive fresh air."

The importance of fresh air for these severely handicapped children—most cannot sit up—must not be underrated, this specialist noted.

"Their breathing capacity is less than 50 percent of normal," he explained. "When you

breathe deeply, your chest moves, but their chests do not. They need fresh air."

"If there is cross ventilation in the wards, there is a draft and the children catch cold," he went on. "At least half of them get respiratory infections. Gouverneur uses

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the same amount of antibiotics in a half-year that another hospital gives in one year."

The specialist charged further that Gouverneur's "basement is rotten" and he said "the roof leaks and the ceilings leak."

Problem Plumbing

"And the piping, the plumbing is no good," he said. "You can't tell the hot water taps from the cold—the cold from the hot. Sometimes you turn a cold tap and boiling hot water comes out. And sometimes there is no water."

He charged that the radiators heat up in the summer and cannot be controlled from within Gouverneur. The building's heating plant is across the street, in the Beth Israel out-patient clinic which was part of Gouverneur when it was a city hospital.

The State Department of Mental Hygiene leased Gouverneur in August, 1961, and pays a \$13,000-a-year-rental to the city. Under the lease the state is required to maintain the building and, to such purpose, spent \$6000 to repair the elevators and \$17,000 repaint and refurbish the building.

"The elevators are not good," the specialist said. "They are old, rotten elevators. They're always getting

stuck and there's always something wrong."

Furthermore, he said, paint is peeling off the walls.

"It holds for a while, but then it peels off," he said. "You can't paint old walls."

Not Fire-Proof

He also questioned the assertion that Gouverneur is a "fire resistant" building.

"I'm surprised at the Fire Department that they agree to these conditions," he said. "Doors are not safe. In case of fire, doors should be closed. But these doors cannot be shut tight enough."

"In the past, fireman just walked through Gouverneur quickly and that's it. Now, with all these articles, I understand they went and inspected the place again just the other day."

And the building gives off an odor of old age, he said. "When you walk into the building, you immediately

smell the thick walls. They are moist, because they are so old."

Despite these glaring deficiencies in Gouverneur's physical plant, he said, "children get no better care anywhere."

"The building is rotten," he said, "but the care is so good that you're in a dilemma."

He expressed the fear that, if the building were razed, another would not be built to replace it. He suggested that the state take over a nursing home or another hospital building in better condition to house Gouverneur's 208 mentally retarded children.

There was also praise for Dr. Jack Hammond, Willowbrook's director, for both his work and attitude toward caring for the retarded.

"If a child should die," he said, "Hammond wants a diagnosis immediately — and this is something that never happened before."

Hammond cracked down on the previous frequent practice of falsifying death records after becoming director, the specialist said.

"And there is an amazing thing," he added. "In four years, only 12 or 13 children have died at Gouverneur — one of the best possible records."

Saving Grace

From a medical standpoint, he said, "Willowbrook sends over the worst children — and they live at Gouverneur."

One of the saving graces at Gouverneur, he said, was the building's compactness. "If you have only 200 or 400 children, you can do a job," he said. "But how can they take care of children at a place where there are thousands of patients?"

"At some places, children are always being found dead in the morning. Not at Gouverneur."

"It is a difficult situation," he concluded. "Children get good medical care, attention, food — they gain weight — but the building is no good. If they were just to tear down the building and not replace it, then I say we must keep Gouverneur."

But when asked why the building should not be replaced, he replied reflectively:

"It's not necessary to have that building. It won't save the thousands who cannot get into Willowbrook. These children, you know, are entitled to the same air we breathe."

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