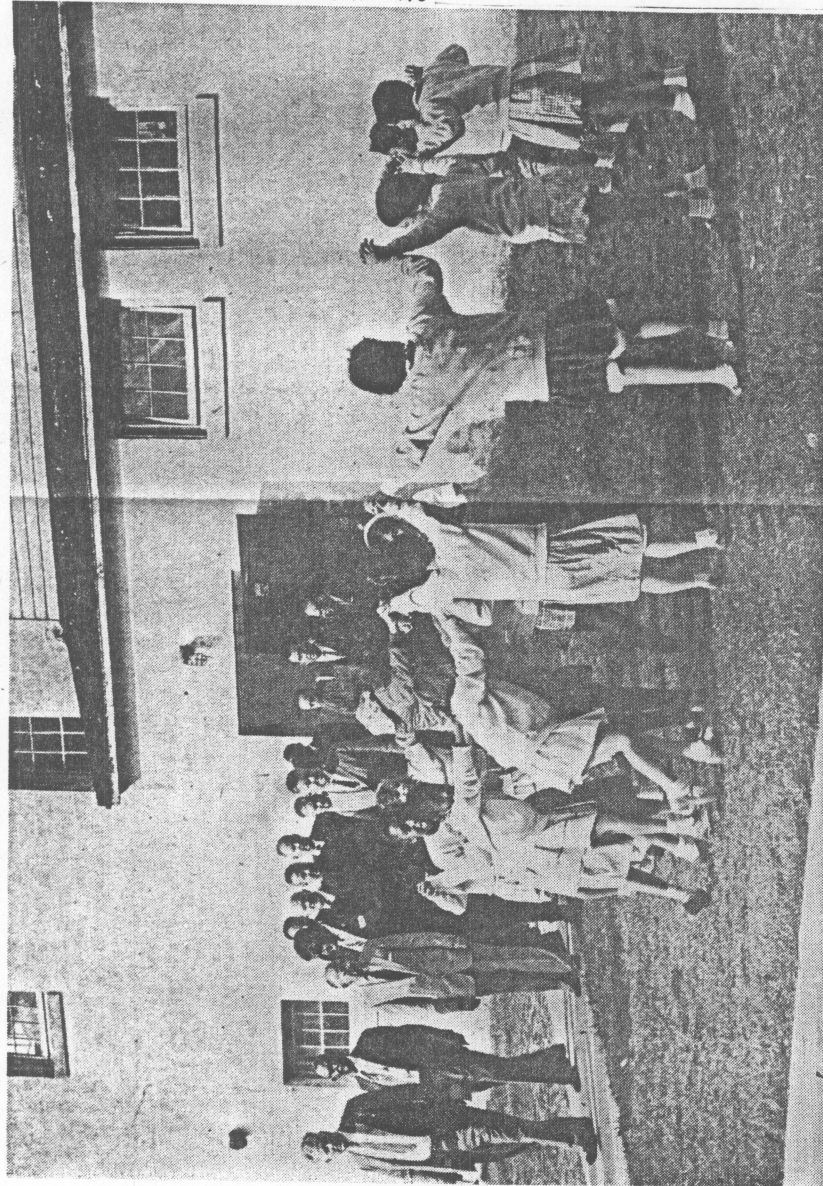


Staten Island Review

Willowbrook Relief Year Away



Grand jurors filing out of the gym at Willowbrook pause to watch a group of girls at their games. The panel probing conditions at the state school visited wards and classrooms in their visit.

By MARK WIESNER

The opening of a new state institution for the retarded in Suffolk County tomorrow will not ease overcrowding at Willowbrook for at least six months, it was learned yesterday.

Gov. Rockefeller said Suffolk State School's opening would relieve conditions at Willowbrook, but it was learned that transfer of patients from Willowbrook to Suffolk is some time off.

"I expect it will be six to 12 months before Suffolk will be able to take patients from here," Dr. Jack Hammond, Willowbrook's director said.

A Richmond County grand jury had a first-hand look at conditions at the overcrowded

and understaffed Staten Island institution yesterday.

THE SURPRISE visit of the jury came coincidentally on the heels of the governor's announcements of measures to reduce overcrowding and improve patient care.

Rockefeller approved additional jobs for teachers and therapists and gave the State Department of Mental Hygiene a Dec. 1 deadline to submit to him a list of facilities in the New York City area, which could be rehabilitated for use in housing Willowbrook's overflow.

Facilities to house 500 to 1,000 patients are being sought, Hammond said. Patients who were formerly at Willowbrook have been sent to Bronx State

Hospital to await Suffolk's opening, but it will be at least 6 months before any of Willowbrook's current population of 5,900 can be transferred there.

Willowbrook has a certified capacity of 4,500.

The grand jury investigation was prompted by accidental deaths at the school, and the jurors toured the building where two deaths occurred and saw conditions representative of those attacked by U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy last month.

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BRAISTED went on to say that he saw evidence of dedicated and conscientious work of employees.

In addition to trying to help prevent such accidents as those that prompted the inquiry, its aim is to acquaint the public with what goes on at the institution and to "help Dr. Hammond improve conditions," Braisted stated.

He paid tribute to Hammond for "cooperating fully and holding back nothing."

Hammond, who led the grand jurors, members of the D.A.'s staff and reporters on the tour of the wards and buildings, said the job positions approved by the governor represent only "a beginning."

The department has already been looking at a number of facilities in the city which can be rehabilitated for use," Hammond said.

"One of the things being considered is the possibility of leasing or purchasing stainless steel, pre-fabricated buildings, similar to portable classrooms."

Hammond said it would be better if additional facilities were erected on the state school grounds where there have been

some.