



At the overcrowded Rome State School for Mental Defectives, inmates listen to music in a basement recreation room. (The New York Times (by Allyn Baum))

Overcrowding to Be Eased at Rome, N.Y., School

By MURRAY SCHUMACH
Special to The New York Times

ROME, N. Y., Oct. 13—Long-range plans to end the critical overcrowding at the Rome State School for Mental Defectives have been put into effect.

This is the most important change made at this institution since Senator Robert F. Kennedy, on Sept. 9, delivered a caustic criticism of the state's treatment of retardates.

The development has become a subject of excited speculation throughout the school.

Nurses and attendants discuss it in the wards, where the patients' beds are often only a foot apart. Some of the patients even wonder about being transferred as they spoon their food, sway on swings, wait to dance to rock 'n' roll records, stand in line for the bathroom, or fondle toys or new clothes.

Repeatedly, along the walks

lined by trees in brilliant color, one hears a patient tell another: "I'm gonna leave." Or else ask: "Are you leaving?"

Within a year, it was learned today, some 500 patients will have been transferred from this school to other institutions. The first 30 have already been sent to the new school at Sunmount, in Tupper Lake, and at least 200 others will leave for Sunmount before Christmas.

Aim for 2,000 Patients

At present, however, the school here is still the most overcrowded in the state. It has 4,317 patients, although its capacity is supposed to be 3,058.

The new plan is designed to reduce the number of patients to 2,000 by 1970, according to Dr. Charles Greenberg, the school's director. He said this plan had been worked out long before Senator Kennedy criticized state's handling of retardates.

One aspect of the plan is

not clear—whether the school at Rome will get more help or whether, as the number of patients is reduced, employes will be transferred to other schools. Dr. Greenberg said he did not know what would happen.

"These are policy matters," he said, "and they are decided in Albany."

It is generally conceded here that the institution needs more help. It now has 1,533 employes. Unlike the school for mental defectives at Willowbrook, on Staten Island, the Rome School has been able to get employes for every job available.

But amid plans and talk of the future, the routine of the institution seemed no different from that on Sept. 11-12, when this reporter was there for two days.

There was the same firmness of nurses and attendants toward patients. The same wariness that comes of experience with instantaneous tantrums of

remarkable violence. Waking, eating, sleeping were on schedule, as ever. A supervisory nurse, Mrs. Irilla Satterly, remarked: "Nothing in the routine or the operation of the school has been changed since Senator Kennedy's visit. Don't see why it should."

Morale Found Improved

Other developments at the Rome school, while intangible, are significant, according to nurses and attendants who were questioned.

They said employe morale, which slumped after the Kennedy comments, had recovered fully, though they saw no indication that old buildings, at least one of which has been condemned, would be replaced. Planks on some floors creak loudly underfoot.

The optimistic attitude of employes was illustrated by two

Continued on Page 50, Column 4

held here in mid-September was attended by more than 70 persons. Generally, these meetings draw a maximum of 30 parents, sometimes as few as 20.

However, not all of the reactions have been favorable since Senator Kennedy made his speech of criticism in New York City before the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental Retardation.

Social workers report that some of the parents who had planned to place retarded children in the Rome school were now having second thoughts.

Another aspect of life at the institution emerged from an off-hand remark by an experienced employe, who said of a patient: "I remember her mother as a patient."

new ones. One of them, Mrs. Evelyn Versace, has a married daughter and a son at college. She was working among some of the most helpless of the retardates, some in beds, others crawling on the floor.

"I heard all these stories about a 'snake pit' before I came here," she said. "Look at this. Look how clean everything is. And this is not easy to keep clean."

Miss Dolores Fielding, another attendant trainee, said: "When you work here you really learn to appreciate what you have. The simple things, like being able to feed yourself, being able to wash yourself and dress yourself."

Parents Give Support

Partly responsible for the improved employe morale was the support the community gave the Rome school. Comment in newspapers and on radio and television in the area has been favorable. Employes say there is little doubt that residents of the community will send record amounts of clothing and toys for the patients this year.

Parents of the children at this institution were reported also to have reacted very favorably toward the employes here and to have shown an understanding of the work done by nurses and attendants, despite overcrowding and understaffing.

A meeting of such parents