

STATE UNIT URGES FOR THE RETARDED

Parent Group Calls for New Agency to Meet Special Needs of Children

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The parents of mentally retarded children, through their state organization, demanded today that Governor Rockefeller create a new agency to care for their youngsters.

They complained bitterly that the State Department of Mental Hygiene has for years focused its energies on mental illness and has shamefully neglected the needs of the retarded.

Creation of the new office was the major item in a legislative program drafted here at the annual convention of the State Association for Retarded Children.

The delegates, each with a deeply personal knowledge of the problems of retardation, convened a month after Senator Robert F. Kennedy set in motion a wave of public indignation over conditions in state institutions for the retarded.

There are many, far too many, Senator Kennedy said, "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 — without adequate supervision or a bit of affection — condemned to a life without hope."

Failures of State Cited

Joseph T. Weingold, the association's executive director, told the convention:

"In 38 years of the existence of the Department of Mental Hygiene, we have finally arrived at the present state of services for the retarded. The department has failed utterly to meet the standards of care for patients in the state schools for the mentally retarded.

"It would be completely useless to reorganize the department when mental retardation is a very secondary consideration in comparison to mental illness. The only remedy we can see is a separate department with its own commissioner."

Mental retardation stems from

a variety of organic disorders, usually present at birth that affect the functioning of the brain and result in a low I. Q. Mental illness refers to emotional disorders that affect the person's ability to relate to other people and the rest of the world.

Several officials of the Mental Hygiene Department who tried to explain its program to the delegates found themselves the targets of angry attacks.

"For years you've called us paranoid everytime we complain," one mother shouted at a spectator. "When Senator Kennedy told the public how bad things are at Willowbrook and Rome, you said he was exaggerating, too."

"Then public opinion forced you to take a few short steps in the right direction. You brought in a few new therapists and teachers. And you say you've been planning to do this all along."

At one point, Dr. Stanley P. Davies, the department's deputy director for planning, said heatedly:

"I don't feel in the mood to speak defensively."

Dr. Davies tried in vain to persuade the parents that his department was doing everything possible for their children.

The one official who escaped the delegates' derision was Dr. Jack Hammond, director of the Willowbrook State School for Mental Defectives on Staten Island. It was Willowbrook that sustained the brunt of Senator Kennedy's attack—a place, he said, where retarded children waste away their lives "in dimness and gloom and idleness and stench."

Dr. Hammond received a

standing ovation when he stepped to the rostrum last night at the association's annual dinner. The parents' affection for him was explained afterwards by Mrs. Shirley Epstein, president of the Benevolent Society, which is composed of the families of Willowbrook children.

Mrs. Epstein's son had lived at Willowbrook until he died a few years ago.

"Everything Kennedy said about Willowbrook is true," Mrs. Epstein said, "and I could tell you even worse horror stories. But don't blame it on Dr. Hammond."

"That man has worked day and night for those children since he took over Willowbrook a year ago. He has pleaded with the department for more staff, more equipment, more funds. Long before Bobby Kennedy got into the act, Dr. Hammond was trying to get those characters in Albany to move."

The association's legislative program also called for abolishing the fees now paid by the families of the mentally re-

tarded in state institutions. These fees, based on income, range to a maximum of \$210 a month. Mr. Weingold said a family with an annual income of \$5,000 was generally charged \$35 to \$50 a month for the care of a retarded patient.

He pointed out that other handicapped persons—the blind, the deaf, and tubercular patients—are cared for by the state at no cost to their families.

At the very least, Mr. Weingold said, there ought to be a cutoff at age 21, when parents normally stop paying for the support of their children.

Education Stressed

The association also demanded a law requiring that retarded youngsters in institutions receive educations comparable to that which they would if they were living at home.

Dr. Hammond said hundreds of children at Willowbrook were capable of learning, but were not realizing their potentials for lack of teachers.

He said that he had wanted to be on hand for the presenta-

tion of a \$50 award to Clarence Stevens as the outstanding employee at Willowbrook. The association made identical awards to employees from each of the state institutions for the retarded. Speaking of Mr. Stevens, Dr. Hammond said:

"Regardless of whether he is always present and more than willing Mr. Stevens has never forgotten that he started as an attendant, and he still volunteers his services to the care of patients."

During the convention, the delegates inspected the facilities at Mount McGregor in nearby Wilton, a division of the Rome State School. They agreed that Mount McGregor, a former Veterans Administration rest home that was taken over by the Mental Hygiene Department five years ago, was a model institution.

With 345 patients, Mount McGregor is the only such institution in the state that is not overcrowded. Some of the less severely retarded even have their own rooms, a fact that impressed Willowbrook parents, whose children must walk over other beds to reach their own.

The convention elected James Reville of the Letchworth Village chapter as president of the association for the coming year. Mr. Reville, a New York City stockbroker, succeeds Mrs. John Gross of the Nassau County chapter.

Stevens Previously Honored

Recently a special committee of Willowbrook's 2,000 employees named Mr. Stevens the school's "outstanding" staff member.

According to a school official, the maintenance foreman always put the patient's welfare first. On his own time Mr. Stevens invented toys and "gadgets" for the amusement of the children. Many of them were fabricated out of odds and ends of discarded equipment.

Mr. Stevens joined Willowbrook 16 years ago after working at St. Lawrence Hospital in Ogdensburg as an attendant. At Willowbrook he was advanced to carpenter foreman and finally maintenance foreman.