

# Willowbrook School Now: Changing for the Better

By MARK WIESNER

Six months after the visit of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy spotlighted deplorable conditions in Willowbrook State School, the institution for the retarded's massive overcrowding problem remains largely unchanged.

But there have been changes and there's the promise of more change in this and other directions, its director, Dr. Jack Hammond, said yesterday.

"We at least have made tremendous strides in bettering conditions," Hammond said. "This doesn't mean I am satisfied with conditions as they are. We have quite a way to go, but it is coming."

To Hammond, Kennedy's visit was not the impetus for change, as changes were already in motion.

"The senator stepped on a moving chain of events," he said.

"I have seen a continuum of improvements that began shortly after I arrived and reported my needs to the department."

Even before he took over control of the facility in July 1964, Hammond said efforts were under way to ease overcrowding.

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**BUT HAMMOND** came upon a situation that was growing worse in the face of efforts by the State Department of Mental Hygiene.

In September 1964, Willowbrook had nearly 6,400 patients — nearly 1,900 over its certified capacity.

In September 1965, when the senator visited, the patient population was 6,055. It's now 5,880.

Hammond said the biggest accomplishment so far was reversal of the trend that was adding 80 to 90 new admissions a month.

This was done by closing admissions at his insistence, an almost unheard of procedure in a state institution.

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**OVERCROWDING** at Willow-

brook is destined to be eased by at least 600 this year through the transfer of 300 patients to recently-opened Suffolk State School and construction of 10 pre-fabricated units for 30 patients each.

The pre-fabs, planned as self-contained units with classroom and dayroom facilities, are scheduled for completion in August. Their cost is estimated at \$1.5 million.

In addition the hunt goes on for facilities on the order of Gouverneur Hospital in Manhattan, which is used as an annex to Willowbrook. Hammond has suggested that pre-fabs for an additional 300 be built if no sites turn up.

This, in addition to \$2 million in renovation and construction of a 25-classroom adjacent to the main school building, are what spells change.

Hammond said in the discussion state are additions to the connecting buildings commonly referred to as the "baby buildings" that house 1,000 children under the age of five.

This would add "training and therapy facilities to the infant building so that we can improve still further the conditions there," the director said.

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**PENDING** applications for two federal grants, teaching affiliations with New York University and one pending with Downstate Medical Center—these are some of the signs of new hope.

Hammond said 350 more job items or positions have been added since his accession and the perennial staffing difficulty is being overcome. The number of openings in all titles has been pared to about 150 out of 2,475 and employe turnover is less.

Last October Gov. Rockefeller authorized these additional job items, teachers 13, bringing the total to 51; 23 recreation jobs, making a total of 31; 12 physical therapists, up to 21, 36 occupational therapists, making 47 in all.

Most of these have been filled, as have attendant positions that were vacant.

Project Remotivations trains attendants to conduct nursery school activities for younger children, who for years were allowed to be dormant.

The number of volunteers, reinforced by a large percentage of senior citizens, has doubled to 200.

For more of the retarded, care is something more than custodial. Even for those receiving custodial care, there is more supervision.

Staffing patterns are improved and the number of incidents in the overcrowded wards with ambulatory and disturbed patients has decreased.

Hammond said the changes that were made were already in the hopper before the senator visited.

He conceded, however, that if Kennedy's visit "brought attention to our problem and emphasized our needs, which we had been trying to get across for so long. It did no harm."