

Willowbrook Now: Hope for the Retarded

By G. BRUCE PORTELL

The sun was going down when Dr. Jack Hammond, director of the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island; walked into Ward A of one of the children's buildings.

Little boys and girls noticed him immediately and came hobbling or walking or crawling over from where they had been playing and grabbed onto his pant legs, indicating that they wanted to be picked up and held. A few started a one-note chorus of "Hello Dr. Hammond" which was taken up by the others.

The room had the smell of little children—a mixture of diapers, soap, young boys.

About 50 cribs filled the room, 12 inches apart. Yet there was no feeling of crowding perhaps because the evening sun was streaming in through the windows. Half the children, severely retarded, were out playing on the terrace before being put down for bed. Two female attendants were moving among them, kindly, taking notice.

The wards in this building, Number 12, were among those inspected a year ago by Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, who shortly after his visit issued a severe and general condemnation of conditions at the school as overcrowded, filthy, even bestial, where patients were stripped of individuality and dignity and left alone to live out their lives unassisted by human attention.

His visit to Willowbrook, whose 5,868 infant and adult patients make it the largest school for the retarded in the country, created a stir. He was accused by the Rockefeller administration of timing the criticism to steal the thunder from an official report on the school which said essentially the same things and of making it appear

as if subsequent improvements were being done because of his initiative.

But Kennedy insisted that the visit did help to stir loose some money from the cracks and crevices of state government. And Dr. Hammond, who felt hurt by the Kennedy statements ("I told him all he used in his press release, but I didn't give it to him in that destructive fashion"), admitted the other day that it has helped to shift public attention to retarded children, something Rockefeller tried to do with a motion picture early in 1965 which produced hardly a ripple of concern.

"The Kennedy visit was in itself demoralizing for the employes," said Al Wurf, executive director of State Employees Council 50, which represents most non-professional school personnel. "But afterward, the state government became more involved with the retarded. It was sort of a catalyst."

But regardless of whether the improvements were already scheduled at the time of Kennedy's visit, as were the renovation of old buildings and increases in personnel, or announced as emergency measures after his criticism, as was the construction of several new buildings, improvements are being made, and Willowbrook is a better place in 1966 than it was in 1955.

Ten new one-story buildings, arranged to house 30 children each, have been built for \$1,300,400 and will be occupied in a matter of days. Twenty-six new classrooms have been added to existing buildings for \$917,000. About \$1,800,000 was spent on renovation existing buildings.

Two-tone institutional green is being replaced with light pastels; black tile and cement floors which looked filthy no matter how thoroughly cleaned

are giving way to lighter, shiny tile. New heating systems are being installed, and foolproof temperature controls are being put into all showers to prevent scalding, which caused two deaths last year.

Another \$2,600,000 has been spent on new dining room additions so patients won't have to be trooped through the rain or snow to a central dining hall, and on new laundry facilities and other structural changes.

More classrooms are now being designed for intensive training of infant retardates whose disability can be lessened if attended to early in life.

Despite these new additions, the school is still badly overcrowded, Dr. Hammond said, and the real solution is to reduce its population to the authorized census of about 4,500.

The state is building another school for the retarded in The Bronx, but that will not be ready for four or five years.

The operating budget for Willowbrook has increased almost 30 per cent since Dr. Hammond took over two years ago, from \$11,600,000 to \$14,800,000. But filling open staff positions has been a problem because of low pay, type of

work ("Some people just can't take it," one staff doctor said) and travel problems (Wurf estimated it would take a resident of Harlem attracted to state service by Rockefeller's new incentive program 2½ hours and 90 cents worth of

commuting each day to work at Willowbrook).

The professional staff was almost tripled during the year. More personnel are promised. But many positions remain vacant. The school is operating with less than half its complement of registered nurses and with 76 ward attendant jobs unfilled.