

# Willowbrook Seeks Homes For Children

A number of residents of Willowbrook State School, from toddlers to senior citizens, are ready and eager to return to normal community life.

Some have been prepared for this step for months, but lack of foster homes has kept them waiting.

Until recently, Willowbrook's social service department could not adequately find and screen homes for residents. But now, with the staff more than doubled, a major campaign is being started.

Robert Gilson, director of the department, explained the family care program.

The department, which has 35 residents in foster homes now, is beginning an intensive search for Island and Brooklyn families who would like to accept a Willowbrook resident in their homes, said Robert Gilson, the department's director.

More than 100 residents, from infants to persons in their 60s, have been selected and prepared by the staff for the transition to community living. Working much like any adoption or foster-care agency, Willowbrook will "match" the resident to the family.

The foster-care arrangement, with monthly compensation to the family by the state, will continue "as long as it meets mutual needs," explained Gilson.

So far, he said, very few residents have returned to Willowbrook. In fact, many of the younger residents grow up calling their foster parents "Mom" and "Pop" and don't leave the home until they married.

Families of any age and ethnic and denominational background are eligible, added Gilson. The only requisite is that they "have a genuine human interest in other people."

Especially for infants, toddlers and school-age children, a home atmosphere is far preferable to an institution, Gilson noted.

Families meet with social workers, and are informed of the entire program before a decision is made. After a resident is placed, the department checks periodically into his status and offers counseling if necessary.

Besides providing essentials such as medical, dental and pharmaceutical supplies and clothing to residents under 18, the state sees that school-age children are placed in public school classes for the mentally retarded, if necessary.

When the child is older, he may attend vocational rehabilitation or occupational training sessions.

The family-care program is one of several at Willowbrook which center on returning the Willowbrook resident to the community. Other activities include working in local businesses and homes.

"With only five social workers in the past, we were never able to establish potential foster homes on the Island," concluded Gilson. "Now, with a larger staff, we can expand our 10-year-old program into a successful and active one."



Two young Willowbrook State School residents who are ready for foster homes talk it over with Robert Gilson, director of the institution's social service department.

Staten Island Advance Photo