

Help for the Retarded

Despite Criticism, Willowbrook School Stands Out as a Center of Excellence

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Willowbrook State School on Staten Island has been in the headlines on a number of occasions over the last two years.

First, it was criticized after a visit by the late Robert F. Kennedy for overcrowding. This was a just criticism, but the statement failed to describe the splendid program for the mentally retarded in operation at Willowbrook.

The program was also criticized because of research being done at Willowbrook primarily on long-term study of various infectious diseases that were prevalent in the institution. These criticisms were unsubstantiated.

A day spent there this month proved to be a most rewarding and revealing one.

The school, situated on a 384-acre plot on Staten Island, has a capacity of 4,500 patients. Its present census, however, is 5,400, of whom 1,500 are so badly disabled they are unable to walk.

Long Waiting Period

There are 1,500 persons on the waiting list, of whom about 200 are under 5 years old. The waiting period for the younger children averages about 15 months. The waiting period for the mentally retarded over 5 is indefinite.

The list has been closed since 1964 and some of those remaining have been listed for more than five years.

The waiting list problem is also acute in the 11 other institutions in New York State for the mentally retarded.

Funds have now been appropriated to plan 10 new facilities with a capacity of 750 patients each.

Building funds will come from the New York State Health and Mental Hygiene Facilities Improvement Fund. Queens, Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan and Westchester will each have one facility.

At the school, 2,000 of the patients are covered by Medicaid, and the state collects from the Federal Government for their care.

In these days of spiraling medical costs, it was almost unbelievable to learn that the per diem cost at Willowbrook in 1968 was \$8.60 a day. This means medical care, nursing, food and lodging, as well as education and all of the necessary therapies.

Over-All Friendly Spirit

The services are provided by 38 full-time physicians; 65 attending and consultant physicians, 85 registered nurses, 53 practical nurses, 1,750 attendants, 130 teachers, 20 physiotherapy aides, 93 occupational therapists and aides, and 53 recreational therapists.

In addition there is the maintenance staff of cooks and cleaners and all other types of helpers to assist in providing the necessary service.

Further, there are 938 volunteers, of whom 300 are senior citizens organized by the Community Service Society of New York. The other volunteers include high school and college students and members of the community.

The senior citizen volunteers are provided with transportation by the Community Service Society of New York. Lunch is supplied by Willowbrook State School. All volunteers make a great contribution to the warmth and friendly spirit that permeates Willowbrook.

The problem is put into true perspective when one learns that 60 per cent of the patients have an I.Q. of under 30; 28 per cent have an I.Q. ranging between 30 and 49 and only 12 per cent have an I.Q. of over 50. A large number of the latter group with education and training provided go back and function as productive citizens in the community.

Under the dynamic leadership of the director, Dr. Jack Hammond, over the last five years the growth both in quality and quantity of the services

rendered has been phenomenal.

In 1964 there were only 30 teachers for the entire institution. There are now 130. The number of therapists, social workers, psychologists and other personnel have increased proportionately.

In 1968 33 new classrooms were completed for a special program for children under 5. The program is now in full operation. This is in addition to the academic school department that provides education and training for 750 additional pupils.

Emphasis everywhere is on color and action.

Every patient with any capability is in the school program and the most severe cases of those unable to get out of bed are wheeled out in the sunshine on to the periphery of the classrooms and playgrounds.

To those familiar with the old stagnating programs for the retarded, a walk through Willowbrook is a stimulating and heartwarming experience.

Speech-Disorder Program

A few thumbnail observations indicate the dynamics of the program.

At meal time the children eat with knives and forks like other people instead of suffering the ignominy of spoon feeding, and even the severely retarded are proud to use their napkins.

There is a special program for the blind children. Most of the blindness has occurred as a result of rubella. In this program are all of the latest training aids as well as highly experienced personnel.

There is a special program for the 170 pupils with speech disorders under the direction of three qualified speech therapists and the finest modern equipment. The same is true for the deaf.

It was interesting to note that the severely retarded youngsters in one classroom were putting together the cut-outs of the lunar module.

There were 500 older patients at Willowbrook in the therapeutic work program. They help to keep the grounds, work in the bakery, kitchen and

scores of other tasks which they delight in doing.

Unfortunately, under state regulations, these patients cannot be paid for their work, but funds from volunteer sources, primarily from parents, have set up a fund so they are paid \$2 per month. It sounds little but it means a lot if one has nothing.

A Treat Mobile similar to the Good Humor truck makes continuing rounds and serves free ice cream cones to all a merry-go-round and a small ferris wheel, given by the parents, goes from morning to night in a carnival setting.

In every place there is color and more color. The entire program is dynamic and go-go.

The results of the medical care and research program is proof of its excellence.

In the past measles was the number one killer. In 1960 there were more than 600 cases with 60 deaths.

A measles immunization program was started in 1961. Since that time, there has not been a single case of measles and no fatalities or untoward results from the injections.

The eradication of measles and its complications from Willowbrook was made possible because of important research that was supported by the Health Research Council of the City of New York.

All new patients upon admission whose blood shows no immunity are routinely vaccinated against measles, rubella and mumps.

In science there are special institutions that are called centers of excellence. Willowbrook is truly a center of excellence for the mentally retarded.

If one feels tired and depressed on a hot, humid summer day, a visit to Willowbrook will be an exciting antidote. Families are welcome to visit patients at any time on any day.

For others interested in a tour, it is suggested that prior arrangements be made so that an escort will be available.