

Staten Island Advance

Staten Island, N.Y., Monday, November 15, 1971

Parents protest cutbacks at state school

By JANE KURTIN

While about 100 of their parents marched outside and protested crippling budget cuts, severely retarded patients in Willowbrook State School spent yesterday in darkened, barren rooms, wailing at the concrete walls that mark the boundary of their world. Some, half-naked, huddled in

corners or behind a very few open doors. Others wandered aimlessly, flailing their arms, or sat rocking quietly in plastic chairs.

For parents who have been visiting their retarded children at Willowbrook for dozens of years, it is not the sight of distorted faces or the pathetic, deafening cries that shock the senses.

For those people — who long ago faced the tragedy of their children's retardation — it is the apparent level of neglect at the school which encouraged a march.

Asking that their names be withheld, parents described scenes where children were marched into a dining hall, naked, and marched out again minutes later with only the food they could grab from the tables clenched in their hands.

Those adults who regularly bring their children home on weekends explained that they are always extremely hungry and thirsty when they arrive and that the first hours together are devoted almost entirely to eating.

One woman, whose son was transferred to Willowbrook three months ago, said that he has lost 20 pounds since his arrival at the institution.

Dr. Jack Hammond, the school's director, attributed the insufficient supervision of patients "to deteriorating services due to the loss of 500 employees whose positions could not be filled under New York State's job freeze, and to absenteeism.

Hammond, who said "similar situations exist in all our institutions," commented that the situation at Willowbrook "was worse eight years ago when

there were 1000 fewer employees.

Explaining that the school's operation "reached its peak just prior to the 1970 beginning of the freeze," Hammond said that "it has never been possible to give patients the kind of care we would like to give them."

An average of two attendants watches over wards with as many as 60 — sometimes more

and cannot be effectively controlled because of the severe overcrowding.

"This place is like the Congo," a doctor claimed. "We have sickness here that you just don't find anymore in the civilized world."

A visitor yesterday saw a bleak, empty room which, according to employees, was until recently occupied by a woman kept there in solitary confinement for three years.

Because of the already insur-

mountable problems of dealing with residents, an employe commented, "rebellious or individualistic patients are punished by isolation."

With no staff to handle them, problem cases are sometimes confined in these empty rooms for years with nothing more than a mattress, the employe claimed.

Dr. Hammond gave the current hospital patient census as 2,200. The institution's capacity, according to state standards, is 1,500. The anger and frustration of

the parents who carried placards yesterday at Willowbrook is not directed at attendants in the school, they said.

"They do what they can," a father commented, "but it's like a drop in the bucket."

One man observed, "The animals at the Staten Island Zoo have more space and get better care than the children at Willowbrook."

"We have to decide," an employe said, "if the people here are going to be treated like nothing more than protein garbage or human beings."

patients, parents concurred. "With that kind of supervision," a staff member said, "the best that can be hoped for is that the patients are kept together."

In one ward, a visitor was greeted by women patients who rushed frantically to be able to say hello, make conversation and be hugged.

"These people," an employe at the school said, "are in desperate need of contact."

Many of them don't belong here and could, if they received intensive training, go back into society.

"Because of the staff shortage," the employe continued, "they are lumped together and receive no programming. They regress terribly."

Diseases, a member of the medical staff claimed, ran rampant throughout the institution

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Say retarded children being neglected



Parents of patients in Willowbrook State School march in front of the institution's administration building to protest budget cuts and a job freeze which have left 500 staff vacancies unfilled. S.I. Advance Photo by Tony Ceramano