

Willowbrook blames Albany

By JANE KURTIN

Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook State School, is resigned to a legislative process which has let down Willowbrook and the entire state Department of Mental Hygiene.

Admitting that he must "rely on the judgment of legislators," Dr. Hammond pointed out that none of Staten Island's three law makers has inspected conditions at the institution for the past six years.

However, Assemblyman Lucio F. Russo vigorously attacked a plea made in March by Mental Hygiene Commissioner Alan D. Miller while budget cuts were under discussion.

Claiming that Miller attempted to distort facts about the condition of state institutions "to accomplish the selfish purpose of having no cuts at all," Russo gave the assurance that "no one is trying to cut vital areas of public health."

"We're trying to trim the

waste and fat out of the budget," Russo explained.

But, according to Dr. Hammond, much more than "waste and fat" were removed when \$37,357,364 was cut from Gov. Rockefeller's proposed \$448,913,521 budget for the Mental Hygiene Department.

In a statement of long-range plans submitted to the Department of Mental Hygiene for the 1971-72 fiscal year, Dr. Hammond described Willowbrook this way:

"Our buildings remain seriously overcrowded. In many buildings the living conditions for patients are inhumane and intolerable, which in turn makes the working conditions for employes extremely difficult, extremely aggravating and extremely frustrating and unsatisfying.

"When 60.6 per cent of the population of an institution is not even toilet trained, and 60.9 per cent of them are ambulatory, you can imagine that

working conditions are not pleasant.

"We have an impossible situation here," Dr. Hammond continued, "which is not entirely understood by the public.

"We have never been able to run this institution the way it should be run because the funds have not been available. I don't even know where the Legislature would find the money.

"There were problems when we had four attendants on a ward with 60 patients, and now

we have to consider ourselves lucky if we have two.

"When the job freeze went into effect, we had more than 200 positions we were waiting to fill. Since the freeze, we've lost 500 more employes," which leaves the institution nearly 800 short in personnel.

"In addition to this," Dr. Hammond added, "we average about 100 unscheduled absences daily. On weekends, we sometimes have as many as 130 to 140 people out."

Dr. Hammond is pessimistic, however, about the extent of improvement in individual cases at Willowbrook, even if the number of attendants is enlarged.

"You have to bear in mind the condition of the patients," Dr. Hammond said. "Some might be toilet trained, some might improve, but it wouldn't be anything grandiose.

"When I am asked what I can promise in results for the money that we want to put in Willowbrook, I'm put in an extremely difficult position. It's as though someone were to ask me if I could run a mile in record speed if I lost 50 pounds. How can one say?"

Generally, Willowbrook State School comes no where near meeting standards which are set by the New York State and

New York City Health Department.

"The report completed by a New York State inspector described, among other things, a 'hazardous lack of staffing,'" Dr. Hammond said.

While the state Department of Health demands that violations be corrected in the operation and maintenance of the institution, he said, State Legislature proceeds with budget cutting

which makes improvements impossible.

"It's even more involved than that," Dr. Hammond said, "because federally sponsored programs such as Medicaid and Medicare, which give us money, use New York State standards to determine which facilities are eligible for funds and which are not.

"Negative results of inspections by state officials can mean that we will be cut off from the federal government's subsidized programs."

Although Dr. Hammond stated that he "cannot just write letters to the governor" asking for assistance at Willowbrook, the Board of Visitors (citizens who monthly inspect the institution) does carry on active correspondence with legislators and Gov. Rockefeller.

"The board writes letters to legislators, describing the critical situation here," Dr. Hammond said, "and they usually receive a letter which

says, in effect, that the lawmakers have received the information and share their concern for the institution.

"But even the Board of Visitors can't keep putting letters on the governor's desk. They'll wear out their welcome and it will come to a point when he'll look down at a letter and say, 'Not Willowbrook again.'