

Care is their right

It is written in the 25th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me."

That is the message to Gov. Rockefeller and our State Legislature about what is happening to the mentally retarded and otherwise handicapped who are in Willowbrook State School.

The descriptions of how so many of them are treated so poorly, or almost entirely ignored, in a series of articles in the Advance this past week make Willowbrook a far worse place to be a prisoner than Attica State Prison has ever been. For these poor children—and most of them remain children mentally for all their lives—have done no wrong against society, unless being handicapped from birth can be considered a crime.

Some of them will never leave Willowbrook. They are too incompetent to make it into the everyday world most of us live in. But there are others who could be trained for a useful, productive and self-sustaining role in society with adequate care and instruction. Alas, all too often it's not only inadequate but sometimes missing entirely.

It isn't the fault of the people who work on the Willowbrook staff. Most of them are truly dedicated people, Staten Islanders for the major part, who have learned to love their charges and want only the best of care for them. But these staffers have seen their numbers decimated by cutbacks in the state budget. They are overworked. Doing tasks that took many other people, they just don't have the time to provide all the attention to each individual charge they want to.

These handicapped humans are the responsibility not only of Willowbrook's employees, but of every one of us. None can turn his back on their needs and their problems, especially in this land which has for so long and so many held out the beacon of hope and provided the sustenance of life for people in other nations around the globe.

We New Yorkers have been asked to let the state borrow above its debt limit for a number of things, most recently one for transportation—and most of that for more and more superhighways. The voters turned down that one this month. But have they ever been asked to let the state borrow enough money to give humane care to human beings? Which is more important—concrete or these our fellows?

Who among us would deny them what is theirs by right?

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The governor and the Legislature must act speedily to end this callous neglect. Our three Island legislators, who haven't visited Willowbrook very much at all, must go there and see for themselves what is needed, then move forthrightly to have it provided.

The least of these, our brethren, may not have a vote, but millions of others who care that Willowbrook's charges get proper care do.

The message is clear. It must not be ignored any longer. If these lonely, deprived and all too often desolate humans were given the gift of life, we more fortunate others cannot deny them the gift of love.