

Legislators Tour School for the Retarded

By JOHN SIBLEY

A delegation of state legislators, touring the Willowbrook State School for the mentally retarded yesterday, walked into a ward where 65 "profoundly retarded and disturbed" men were being cared for by two attendants, one of them a woman.

The stench of feces and urine pervaded the ward, because most of the patients are not toilet-trained. Half a dozen of the patients were stark naked and many of the men's faces were bruised and cut.

"They really bank each other around," Dr. Jack Hammond, Willowbrook's director, told the visitors. "Tranquilizers won't hold them. Nothing holds them."

Yesterday's tour of the school, at 2760 Victory Boulevard, Staten Island, was made by the Democratic Task Force on Health, a group of Democratic Assemblymen headed by Andrew Stein of Manhattan. The tour was led by Dr. Hammond and the parents of several Willowbrook patients.

Mr. Stein was accompanied by two other members of the committee, Saul Weprin of Queens and Louis DeSalvio of Manhattan and Staten Island.

Children a Problem

In another building, the legislators saw 170 small children being tended by nine attendants. Most of these youngsters had not been toilet trained, and a majority were unable to feed themselves.

"They wet and they soil," Dr. Hammond said. "They have to be changed six or eight times a day. Most of them have no speech."

At Willowbrook, the state's

largest institution for the retarded, the patient population has risen from 5,096 on Nov. 30, 1970, to 5,104 on Dec. 8 of this year. During the same period, Willowbrook's staff has been reduced from 3,628 to 2,716.

A job freeze instituted a year ago is causing a continuing attrition of the staff, the legislators were told.

The phrase "state school" is a euphemism. Although a few classes are conducted for the patients capable of learning, Willowbrook is virtually a custodial care institution for human vegetables. The ages of patients range from infants to the elderly.

For institutions such as Willowbrook, the National Accreditation Council for Facilities for the Mentally Retarded recommends a patient-to-attendant ratio of 4 to 1. Willowbrook's ratio ranges from 20-to-1 to 30-to-1.

Since a job freeze that began in the State Department of Mental Hygiene last December, Willowbrook has lost 633 staff members. In addition, it has not been allowed to refill 279 jobs that were vacant when the freeze was started.

Dr. Hammond said the staff shortage was rapidly approaching the levels of 1964, when the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy—whose sister, Rosemary, is mentally retarded—made a much-publicized blast at the state system.

"Most of the gains we made after Kennedy's statement are being erased now," Dr. Hammond said.

Asked about the parent's charges that patients were dy-

ing because of the shortage of nurses and attendants in the wards, Dr. Hammond replied:

"We do have a rare death because of a patient having a convulsion and then aspirating his own vomit."

Asked how often these "rare" deaths occurred, Dr. Hammond said: "Three or four times a month."

Fund Shortage Cited

Dr. Hammond told the legislators that he was reluctant to criticize the State Commissioner of Mental Hygiene, Dr. Alan Miller, in the presence of newspaper reporters who joined the tour. But at a meeting that followed the inspection, he made it clear he opposes the department's allocation of the available funds.

He noted that other state institutions were receiving a larger share of state money than is Willowbrook. Pointing specifically to the new children's unit at the Bronx State Hospital, he noted that that institution had, at the last report, 25 patients and a staff of 145.

Willowbrook's parents' organization noted during the tour that it had contributed 21 special chairs for physically handicapped patients at a cost of \$9,250. In addition—during the current holiday season—the parents plan to donate \$10,000 worth of appliances, including television sets and air conditioners.

Assemblyman Stein told Dr. Hammond that his task force would try to persuade Commissioner Miller next week to give Willowbrook a larger share of the department's budget.