

State Puts Retarded Kids on Brink

It's lunchtime at Willowbrook State School.

A severely retarded blind child paws at her food, trying to feed herself. An attendant will help her later. When there's time.

Nearby, a nurse tries to finish feeding a bed-ridden child in six minutes. She estimates that's all the time she can devote to each patient. There are 40 children

to feed and two nurses to feed them.

On another ward, a man who's just finished eating wanders aimlessly — completely nude. Attendants explain that they can't keep up with the patients who keep ripping off their clothes. The school is running out of clothes anyway.

School administrators say there's nothing new in the

understaffing and overcrowding at Willowbrook, the state school for the brain-damaged on Staten Island. But Democratic state legislators—visiting the institution to investigate effects of the state's job freeze, saw nothing routine in conditions there.

"It's a real disaster area," said Assemblyman Andrew Stein (D-Man.), chairman of

the Democratic Task Force on Health. "I never saw anything like it." Stein and Assemblyman Sol Weprin (D-Queens) toured the facilities with members of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children—a parents' group—and Dr. Jack Hammond, the school's director. Assemblyman Louis DeSalvio (D-Mar., S. I.), joined the group later.

Statistics alone tell a good part of the story at Willowbrook. Since the job freeze was imposed in December, 1970, as part of statewide economies, the school has lost 633 staff members. It continues to lose 15 to 20 in staff every two weeks through attrition.

The patient-attendant ratio is down to 20 and in some cases 30 to one, in an institution where 60 per cent of the patients are not toilet trained, over 22 per cent can't feed themselves and nearly 40 per cent are unable to walk unassisted.

As the legislature considers Gov. Rockefeller's new tax package next week, Willowbrook and other state facilities face either a continuation of the job freeze or a 20 per cent budget cut.

The Governor has said that the cuts will be necessary if his tax proposals are rejected. There is the further possibility that state health institutions may lose Medicaid funds because of non-compliance with Federal standards.

"We're hurting already," said Dr. Hammond. "A further 20 per cent cut would really hit us badly." If Medicaid funds are eliminated, Dr. Hammond says the school, which relies on Medicaid for one-third of its funding, would face a "catastrophe."

Assemblyman Stein's group is preparing legislative recommendations based on its visits to Willowbrook and other institutions. They are also considering holding hearings to investigate charges by parents' groups that part of the problem lies in the Dept. of Mental Hygiene's

allocation of existing funds. The parents claim that some programs are over-staffed and overfunded while other institutions—including Willowbrook—suffer.