

# Willowbrook School A Medical Disaster Area

By John Signoriello

Willowbrook State School for the Mentally Retarded has been the subject of a great deal of controversy of late. Hit hard by budget cut-backs enacted by the State Legislature last year, the sprawling Department of Mental Hygiene school-hospital complex, which presently houses more than 5,000 mentally retarded children and adults, has lost more than 60 members of its staff through lay-offs and attrition. Over-worked ward workers have been unable to care for their charges properly — many of whom are unable to dress themselves or control their bowel movements — and living conditions at the school have degenerated alarmingly. Severe overcrowding is the rule in almost every ward, and the facility's over-taxed medical staff has been unable to control the spread of endemic hepatitis which is presently threatening to reach epidemic proportions.

Conditions at the school, dismal even in the best of times, received a great deal of publicity recently in a series of articles that appeared under banner headlines in the Staten Island Advance. The articles, written by Advance reporter Jane Kurtin, described conditions at Willowbrook in graphic terms and pointed

out that the institution has consistently fallen short of standards set by the State Department of Health. The only reason Willowbrook is allowed to remain open, one Health Department official was quoted as saying, is because of the lack of other suitable facilities for mentally retarded children and adults. "Where there is less need," he explained, "we can be stronger in getting compliance with regulations."

Spurred by the surge of publicity, at least one Island legislator, Assemblyman Edward Amann, demanded an immediate investigation. Greeted, at first, with almost unanimous approval, Amann's action soon lost some of its popular support when it was learned that the investigation would be carried out, not by an independent agency or State Committee, but by the Department of Mental Hygiene itself, and, presumably, at their leisure and within the scope they deem most appropriate.

Meanwhile, conditions at Willowbrook continue to worsen, and alarmed parents groups, such as the Benevolent Society, whose members have children in residence at the school, have been meeting with the facility's Director, Dr. Jack Hammond, in an attempt to have him declare the institution a medical disaster area. Doing so, they claim, would force the Federal Government to dispatch U.S. Public Health Service emergency task force teams to Willowbrook. The PHS teams, they say, could help out the facility's overburdened medical staff, thereby alleviating some of the appalling conditions there which have been repeatedly described, even by the Department of Mental Hygiene itself, as "inhumane" and "intolerable." Hammond, however, has consistently balked at the idea. Asked why at a recent meeting, he reportedly replied, "Because it would be disloyal to my superiors."

Last week, the Staten Island Coalition for a Family Hospital, a group of local doctors, nurses and citizens who advocate complete consumer control over all health services, added its voice to the chorus of protest over Willowbrook by issuing an 8-page "position paper" outlining their appraisal of the situation at the institution, its root

causes and some possible solutions. The paper was drawn up by the group's 8-member Steering Committee, several of whom actually work at Willowbrook, and copies will soon be sent to close to 1,000 people who may be presumed to have some sort of vested interest in the institution, including local, City and State officials, parents with children in residence at the school and a host of prominent figures in the medical profession.

Referring to conditions at Willowbrook as a "horror," the paper begins by outlining a series of steps the Coalition wants taken immediately. They include: (1) immediately halting admissions to Willowbrook State School and all other State Schools currently over their census; (2) immediately declaring the institution both a "social" and "medical" disaster area so as to obtain Federal and State relief; and (3) immediate passage of legislation to establish a "State-wide study commission," with a budget, to investigate and report on the "use, availability and effectiveness" of existing State facilities for the mentally disabled.

Concerning the proposed commission — the formation of which Coalition spokesmen claim is the most urgent need — the paper states:

"It (the Commission) must be entirely independent from the State Department of Mental Hygiene and be composed of State legislators and parents of the handicapped, as well as out-of-State specialists well-versed in the subject of providing health care and training for the mentally handicapped. The commission should be mandated to report its findings within 18 months and those findings should include recommendations for basic changes in the State School system, as well as other services for the developmentally disabled