

Willowbrook job freeze eased

By JANE KURTIN

The job freeze at Willowbrook State School has been partially lifted as the result of an investigation by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene into areas of critical need at the institution.

Employees who leave Willowbrook may now be replaced on a one-to-one basis, but this does not mean the institution will be able to hire at its authorized level.

Since the freeze went into effect, 633 employes have vacated positions at Willowbrook. At the time the freeze was imposed, the state school was already short 279 employes. The institution is 912 employes short of the number authorized before the freeze.

While the one-to-one lifting of the freeze will prevent services at Willowbrook from deteriorating further, it will do nothing to improve the desperate situation which now exists.

"I only wish the lifting were retroactive," said Dr. Jack Hammond, director of the school, "then maybe we could do something."

In the report prepared for the Department of Mental Hygiene by a program analyst and submitted to Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy commissioner of the department, the situation at Willowbrook is described as having reached "a highly critical point."

"Knowing Dr. Hammond and his top administrative people as we do," the analyst wrote, "we know that had there not been very specific admonitions not to belabor the department about the increasing severity of the condition because the department was continuously on top of the situation, we would have literally been flooded with repeated strong letters from Willowbrook concerning the deteriorating situation. However, this was not necessary because

the matters were always discussed during my weekly visits to the institution and daily reported by me to the Albany office."

Describing the difficulties of spreading a very thin attendant staff to cover patients at Willowbrook, the analyst continued:

"It should also be noted that due to the shortage of employes and the need to concentrate on feeding, toileting, bathing, maintenance of nourishment and prevention of illness, it is becoming

increasingly difficult to make ward service employes available to escort patients to the academic school, to the patient clinics, to recreational activities and to any other off-ward services or programs."

Many times it has been said that the attendants at Willowbrook State School do a job which most people could not handle. The report to Dr. Grunberg takes this into account.

"Another matter of great importance," the report said,

"is the increasing dissatisfaction of employes with their working conditions, their increased work loads and their frustrations at not being able to give the kind of care which these patients need. This is resulting in continuing of the high rate of absenteeism, lowering of morale, restlessness, irritation, increasing insubordination, and what is potentially an explosive situation among the employes of the institution."