

Willowbrook: Human lives and politics

By WILLIAM HUS
The Willowbrook tragedy marks a shocking low-point in

American politics — politics that have apparently become too involved in politicians and too negligent of people.

Nothing will be done to correct the horror, either, until the powers that be decide to alter their priorities. And they won't do that until a majority of their constituents convince them that such alteration is admirable and advantageous.

Too many people who hire their public officials on election day and pay their salaries with taxes have sat at home and read Advance reporter Jane

Kurtin's accounts of the atrocity in recent weeks and have quietly and privately agreed that the situation is intolerable. Very quietly they have agreed.

But wait, don't feel bad.

Not one — NOT ONE — Island politician has offered one comment, suggestion, or solution to the problem. Not so much as a voluntary shrug of the shoulders has come from our public servants.

One reason is that any correct solution involves money, much more money than the \$5 million added to the budget last week. And money is a touchy subject because it is scarce.

Promises work wonders when it comes to sewers and highways. But when a dozen mentally retarded children are choking to death every three months, promises sound hollow.

It seems acceptable for them to channel our precious pennies into welfare and to build concrete and steel monuments that will be forceful reminders of accomplishment when the next election day rolls around.

Apparently, improving the conditions at Willowbrook does not offer enough accomplishment.

Assemblyman Edward Amann toured the facility and called for an investigation after an Advance article pointed out that none of the Island's three state representatives had inspected the school in six years.

(The investigation turned out to be no more than a routine weekly visit by a program analyst. His report, released in December, admitted that the school's condition had reached the critical level but said the state's financial crisis had reached the critical level at the same time, thus making it "too late" for more money to be allocated.)

Soon after the report, Amann, a member of the Joint Legislative Council on Mental and Physically Handicapped, rejected a request from Manhattan Assemblyman Andrew Stein, the only official to show continuing interest in the issue, to convene a legislative hearing with subpoena power to probe the deteriorating situation.

The Island's other Assembly representative, Lucio Russo, was somehow able to say that a reduction of \$37 million in the state's appropriation for mental hygiene was a matter of cutting the fat from the budget.

Borough President Connor, in his "State of the Borough" address this week failed to mention Willowbrook at all.

COUNCILMEN SILENT

The Island's city councilmen have been silent. State Sen. John Marchi has been recuperating from illness in Italy.

Other investigations have been talked about, the latest one at the urging of Manhattanite

Stein, who has visited the institution several times in the last two weeks. Investigations can bare no more of the horrible mess than is already known — action is needed.

But wait, don't feel bad.

The victims at Willowbrook, the naked and sick and helpless patients themselves, must be considered.

Amann said on Dec. 6 that he feared the children at the school were becoming "political pawns." If only that were, at least in part, true.

But the tendency has been to dwell on the issue and forget about the human beings that are involved. The two should not and cannot be separated. People are dying. The school is dying. The efforts are miniscule. The excuses are shameful.

The situation gained broad attention when television cameras arrived at the school little more than a week ago. How dismal it was to see attitudes change.

PUBLICITY

Employees who previously had talked frankly about impossible conditions in hopes of seeing improvement suddenly became personalities that needed press conferences.

Director Jack Hammond, who had talked openly to the Advance about the relationship between the school and the state agency that manages it, suddenly found he didn't have to say anything — and didn't.

And worst of all, "concerned" parents, eager to accompany camera crews into a ward during a recent rally, shrugged off apprehensions that a large crowd would frighten the patients by saying, "They don't know what's going on — they don't get frightened." That's frightening.

But wait, don't feel bad.

In July of last year, four months before the controversy began boiling over conditions at Willowbrook, Dr. Hammond gave the Advance a status report on a newly instituted federal program, the "Country Club" program, which involved 95 severely retarded children.

Afforded better facilities and more personal attention, those children, with IQs in the 20s and 30s, learned to dress and feed and groom themselves.

Given their own complex, Building 78, they went to school to improve their skills in handling objects, talking and getting along with others and reading simple signs.

In short, 95 of the school's 5,200 children were supplied with the money it takes to provide a decent atmosphere, facilities for learning and loving care from enough teachers and attendants. It worked.

"The progress of these children has been fantastic," Dr. Hammond exclaimed.

Don't wait — feel bad.