

**Willowbrook State School**

# A dollar saved is a life lost

by Howard Blum

Five babies lie in a row on hard wooden boards. A couple are crying. The others just lie there. One of the babies' legs are too thin. They are folded like scissors. This child will never walk. The others babies' legs are not this bad yet. They will be. There are not enough physical therapists to exercise these babies' legs daily at the Willowbrook State School. The institution cannot afford to hire additional therapists and soon the muscles in these babies' legs will contract. It will be too late to teach them to walk. This is what the \$37 million cut in the State Department of Mental Hygiene budget really means.

**Sixty severely and profoundly retarded adults are locked in a ward big enough for perhaps 20.** Only one attendant is watching these patients. Around him men are ripping off their clothes, urinating. Some sit in plastic chairs, almost comatose, staring into a dark gray wall. Others crawl across the stone floor. Still others scream. This is how these men spend every day of their lives. This is their future. There are not enough dollars to hire therapists or attendants to try somehow to reach these men. This is what the budget cuts in Albany really mean.

One nurse is trying to feed a ward of 60 children. Many of these children are not toilet-trained. Many are not ambulatory. Most need to be spoon-fed. It takes this nurse nearly four hours just to feed this ward. There is little time to change urine-soaked clothes. There is little time to get any of these children to try to respond to range-emotion therapy. Without therapy, these children will grow unresponsive, completely cut off. This is their future. This is what the state budget cuts really mean.

The Willowbrook State School in Staten Island is the largest home for retarded people in the country. It has 27 buildings, most built before 1940, housing more than 5200 patients. The facilities can accommodate, perhaps, 3000 patients. Before this year's budget cuts the staff was too small. Now the staff has been cut by an additional 633 members. Now there are more than 800 staff vacancies.

Attendants in the wards cannot inter-act with patients. They are too busy trying to feed and keep these patients clean. The task is impossible. Over 78 per cent of the patients are severely and profoundly retarded. This means they have IQs below 36. Over 60 per cent of the patients are not toilet-trained. Over 40 per cent are non-ambulatory. There is too much for the attendants to do. When a patient rips his clothes off, they remain off. If a patient stares into space, there is no one to try to inter-act with him. This is life in Willowbrook.

Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook State School, describes conditions there as "intolerable and inhuman." "We are trying to make the best of an impossible situation," he explains. "You can only do so much without money."

When Albany cut \$37,357,364 from the Mental Hygiene Department's budget, these legislators condemned the patients of Willowbrook to an existence with little hope of a future, with little hope for physical improvement. While the cuts were being debated, Mental Hygiene Commissioner Alan D. Miller tried to convince state lawmakers that they would in effect be giving up on a future for this state's institutionalized retarded if they approved such sweeping cuts. Assemblyman Lucio Russo accused Miller of attempting to distort facts about the conditions of state institutions "to accomplish the selfish purpose of having no cuts at all." "We're trying to trim the waste and fat out of the budget," Russo explained.

Among the "waste and fat" were physical therapists and attendants for the Willowbrook State School. Funds to open a Brooklyn State School, an institution nearly 90 per cent completed, were frozen. The building stands almost ready for use, yet empty while over-crowded Willowbrook is forced to accept emergency patients. Funds were also cut to build a Bronx State School for which plans and promises have been made since 1965.

Last week Governor Rockefeller granted an increase in expenditures for the State Department of Mental Hygiene, allowing the Willowbrook School to re-hire at least half the personnel it lost due

to attrition in the past year. This gesture was probably largely prompted by a series of articles in the Staten Island Advance and by a week's series of reports by Geraldo Rivera on Channel 7's "Eyewitness News." Yet while it is encouraging, conditions are still intolerable at Willowbrook. Even with this increase, the staff will still have more than 500 vacancies. Its facilities are still old and inadequate. Every ward is over-crowded. And Dr. Hammond predicts an operating deficit of over \$1 million for this year.

**If State Department of Health standards were enforced according to a state health official,** Willowbrook could be forced to close. The over-crowding is unsafe and unhealthy. Beds are pushed directly against each other, contrary to state law which requires at least 60 square feet between beds. There are not enough attendants to maintain proper health standards. Doctors report periodic epidemics of hepatitis running through the institutions. It is difficult to feed all the children. If a child spits out his food, there is little time to try to re-feed him. One mother reported her child lost 20 pounds after a month at Willowbrook.

Yet Willowbrook will not close. There is nowhere else to send its patients. No one else wants them. Dr. Hammond is not optimistic. He suggests, "As long as people are not willing to be taxed to pay for the care of the mentally retarded, conditions at Willowbrook will remain intolerable."