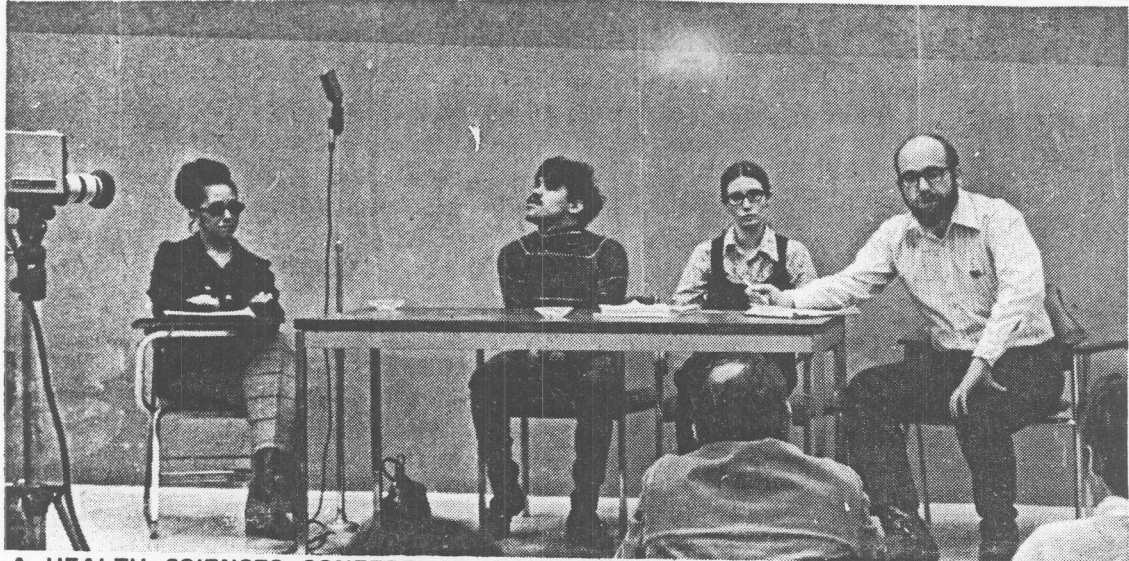


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A HEALTH SCIENCES CONFERENCE, held here last week, discusses the poor conditions at Willowbrook, a Staten Island school for the mentally retarded. photo by Steven Bochner

Poor Conditions at Willowbrook Spur Health Sciences Seminar

By STEVEN BOCHNER

The problems faced by the mentally retarded at State Institutions were presented to a seminar group at the Health Sciences Center last week. The discussion focused on the recently exposed conditions at Willowbrook State School on Staten Island and the chances of providing a productive life for the inmates.

Karen Weissmuller, an activist in the movement to reform treatment programs for the mentally retarded in New York, described the existing conditions at the school: "Long, large rooms . . . long benches . . . little or no furniture . . . some televisions, but usually not working . . . clothes shortage . . . children have no sense of value of clothes. Food shortage . . . many children are undernourished. Numerous medical problems . . . 1400 children waiting to be admitted . . . no room for them.

Generally, conditions at Willowbrook are quite awful." Originally designed to accommodate 4000 residents, it now houses 5200.

Weissmuller also explained the problems with New York's institutional programs. "Once a child becomes institutionalized, the state becomes the child's guardian. As the child's guardian, it should be looking out for the child's interests." Yet, she explained, this would lead to a conflict of interests for the state, as it would have to criticize itself. As a result, the school is in constant deterioration and can be expected to worsen unless reforms are made.

Sylvia Black, the mother of a Willowbrook resident, talked about the inadequacies of the educational system at Willowbrook. After a three month period at the institution, her child forgot most of the things he had learned. He began

eating with his hands rather than with a fork. Such trial periods where mother and child are separated are now under examination by citizen groups.

The movement to reform Willowbrook began in April, 1971 with a meeting of seven concerned parents. This blossomed into larger action groups, primarily the Willowbrook Benevolent Society and the Parent Building Committees. More recently, large scale media coverage has opened the plight of the school's residents to the public.

Dr. Michael Wilkins, who held a position as Building Charge doctor until January 1972 when he was released without formal charges, believes that the answer to the problem may be to train parents to cope with their new responsibilities. By giving the child help at home, the crowding in the schools would be relieved, the child would progress more easily, and the State would save a portion of the presently allocated \$5,200 per resident cost per year.

Black, speaking to an audience consisting mostly of prospective health professionals, questioned whether they would be able to tolerate the conditions they would be faced with. "You have to have the desire from your heart. You have to stomach it. You can go into a ward and a child will throw a shoe at you. Will you throw it back at him?"

It was emphasized that all State institutions are faced with situations similar in nature to that of Willowbrook, yet only that one school has been exposed. Dr. Wilkins suggested that the students of the University concentrate their energies toward the reformation of the Suffolk State School, which is located near the campus. "Maybe you can provide an educational program for parents. Run films, run speeches, run discussions—or let them run them," he said.