

TV: Willowbrook State School, 'the Big Town's Leper Colony'

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

For the last several weeks, Willowbrook State School has been getting prominent local, and even national, attention. With 5,300 patients, the Staten Island "school" is one of the largest institutions for the mentally retarded in the world.

In 1965, Robert F. Kennedy compared Willowbrook to a "snake pit," observing that the children "live in filth, that many of our fellow citizens are suffering tremendously because lack of attention, lack of imagination, lack of adequate manpower gives them very little future."

Conditions since then, evidently, have only deteriorated. Willowbrook had received some attention in the press, notably in a Staten Island Advance series last year. Little happened. Then a few weeks ago, the story was offered to local television stations by Dr. Michael Wilkins, an outspoken Willowbrook staff member who was being ousted. Viewer reaction was unusually strong.

The story was carried on all commercial channels. And WPIX-TV, for instance, is presenting a two-part special study called "Exceptional People: Hide Them? Or Help Them?" The first half-hour was shown last Sunday; the second will be shown this Sunday at 10:30 P.M.

The biggest impact, however, seems to have been made by WABC-TV's "Eye-witness News" with an investigative report compiled by Geraldo Rivera. Obtaining a key to one of Willowbrook's buildings, Mr. Rivera

and a camera crew made an early-morning visit to the institution and filmed the patients under "uncontrolled conditions."

The recorded scenes were shocking, depicting in horrifying detail what Mr. Rivera called "the Big Town's leper colony." The reporter covered subsequent "official tours" of Willowbrook, visited another and equally appalling New York institution for the retarded, and went to similar California institutions to demonstrate that the conditions in New York were not inevitable.

Tonight at 7:30 o'clock, WABC-TV will present a special half hour produced and written by Mr. Rivera. It is called "Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace."

One doctor in California had been to Willowbrook and he describes Mr. Rivera's "unauthorized" film footage as "an honest portrayal of conditions at their worst." The building visited contained severely and profoundly retarded patients, and there was perhaps one attendant for each 50 children. The conditions, however, could not be dismissed.

Untended, some smeared with their own feces, many of the children were unclothed and all were simply left to sit in the ward all day. The only sound picked up by the technicians was something of an eerie communal wail. Mr. Rivera's narration is unsparing: "This is what it looked like. This is what it sounded like. But how can I tell you about the way it smelled? It smelled of

filth, it smelled of disease, and it smelled of death."

In California, Mr. Rivera found an enlightened approach toward treatment of the mentally retarded. Within a decentralized system of regional centers and satellites, the stress is on parental care and helping the parents to keep the children home when at all possible. Mr. Rivera's conclusion: "They treated the retarded as people; we treat them as something less."

One curious aspect of the story has been the reaction of official New York agencies. Almost without fail, they profess to be delighted,

stressing that change be made only through public awareness.

True, last year the budget for the Department of Mental Hygiene was cut by \$20-million, and Willowbrook lost another 200 employees. True, after the recent television coverage started, Governor Rockefeller restored the \$20-million. But that will still leave Willowbrook with 600 fewer employees than it had in November, 1970.

The point being made by Mr. Rivera is that pouring more money into the same system, offering little more than depositories for the re-

tarded, no longer promises an answer. "More money would certainly help," he argues, "at least the kids would have clothes and they'd be cleaner than they are now. But they'd still be basically human vegetables in a detention camp. What we need is a new approach."

State officials maintain that new approaches are already being devised in experimental programs. Perhaps television, demonstrating that it can be a powerful force for change in the community, will change its way and return to the Willowbrook story at regular intervals in the future.