

## Letters to the Editor

### The Willowbrooks Must Go

To the Editor:

Surely some questions should be raised as to why conditions at Willowbrook State School and Letchworth Village for the mentally retarded have not improved the last twenty years.

In that time, we have had three Governors (Dewey, Harriman and Rockefeller), three appointed Commissioners (McCurdy, Hock and Miller) and three acting Commissioners (Bigelow, Pense and Terrence), all decent men, and none of them apparently could do anything about the situation. It is easy to point the finger at the Legislature for not appropriating enough money, and surely more money should be appropriated. But this does not go to the heart of the situation. More money will not necessarily improve conditions for the children.

In my opinion, it is the philosophy and focus of those responsible for the mental health and mental retardation needs in this state that require examination and change.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that, as an organization, the Department of Mental Hygiene has little interest in the most severely handicapped.

How can we get services for the mentally retarded in a department that spends:

¶ About \$20,000 a year for a mentally ill person in the Bronx State Hospital



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(694 patients, 1,469 filled positions and a budget of \$14,549,000).

¶ Almost \$80,000 for an emotionally disturbed child at Bronx Children's Psychiatric Unit (21 patients, 157 employes, and a budget of \$1,650,825).

¶ Less than \$6,000 per patient at Willowbrook State School with 5,200 patients, and a budget of \$29,143,675 and less than \$5,000 per patient at

Letchworth Village with 4,000 patients, and a budget of \$18,248,902.

The Department of Mental Hygiene spends almost 800 per cent more on mental health than on mental retardation. (About \$7 million on mental retardation and about \$60 million on mental health).

Unless there is a separate department that will deal with the problems of the mentally retarded in the institutions and the community, divorced from the present mental hygiene structure, nothing constructive will happen.

For some time we have urged the Department of Mental Hygiene to cease building new institutions as now planned. Instead, large institutions such as Willowbrook should be phased out by substituting group homes in the community over a period of perhaps ten years.

For the very severely handicapped, who need medical care and treatment, small nursing homes for thirty to forty should be built. This would be faster (it now takes more than seven years to get an institution built), it would get rid of waiting lists and it would save money.

We cannot much longer tolerate situations such as Willowbrook, the proposed closing of Gouverneur, the closing of Sampson State School and the continuation of human warehouses.

WILLIAM T. CONKLIN  
New York State Senator, 21st District  
Albany, Jan. 28, 1972