

Critics distort Willowbrook plight, employe unit says

In a multi-faceted statement, the Committee for the Employes of Willowbrook State School today asserted:

● That the press, notably television, has distorted the picture of conditions at the state institution.

● That employes are managing to conduct many fine, productive programs inere

● That state dollar-pinching has sharply cut back available personnel and damaged support services.

● That additional funds being released for such institutions fall short of the money needed.

The committee, headed by Dr. William Frew and with membership ranging from attendants to clergymen, contended that 982 residents are enrolled in the education program and that more than 100 residents have been released in the last few

years to function as "productive citizens of society."

Blasting critics for ignoring the training and therapy that is provided, the committee said that through the efforts of the attendants "many children who have previously been thought hopeless are now able to live like normal human beings."

"It has been implied that employes at Willowbrook are uncaring and uncaring and

through their neglect, patients have died from choking. The fact is that the death rate has dropped 33 per cent per year over the past seven years," the group asserted.

"Pictures have been shown of children huddling in corners, food being forced into their mouths — Willowbrook has been referred to as a concentration camp. One resident shown on television time and time again

as an example of the neglect and lack of care patients receive, was admitted to this institution 18 years ago.

"On admission, he was unable to walk or talk, nor could he feed himself," the statement said. "Today, he is able to speak and his IQ has increased to 77 — and he is being used to indict Willowbrook!

"His mother, who failed to visit him for 18 years, is now showing great concern over his welfare."

Decrying the conditions rather than the workers, the committee stated, "We cannot deny, and Dr. (Jack) Hammond, director of the school has not denied, that there are conditions that could improve. But to say the director and his staff are at fault for these conditions and have done nothing about them does little but inflame the public, embarrass the patients and cast aspersions on the parents for being so heartless as to leave their children at Willowbrook.

"Dr. Hammond has publicly and privately spoken out about conditions — the need for more staff and more buildings — so that overcrowding can be relieved."

The group pointed out that the State's "freeze" on hiring ordered in December, 1970, resulted in a staff reduction of 25 per cent (from 3,600 to 2,700) in 12 months. They claimed support services, such as laundry and maintenance and food service, also experienced cutbacks and the school for practical nursing was "sum-

marily closed by Governor Rockefeller."

"It is true that the governor did, after publicity began, find an additional \$25 million to allot to all state institutions," the statement said, but it claimed Willowbrook's payroll alone is almost \$1 million every two weeks and called Rockefeller's move "too little and too late to meet the total needs of our patients."

In an effort to describe the various programs that are in operation despite the handicaps present and to show the work that the employes are doing, the committee detailed the activities for each age group of residents at Willowbrook—

"There are many and varied programs at Willowbrook, most of which are unique and specifically developed for the children, and one enjoys federal funding. We have developed a very specialized Infant Therapy Center, which is an interdisciplinary program designed to maximally stimulate nearly 500 retarded youngsters up to age seven.

"In addition to enjoying a very fine architectural setting, the program makes extensive use of teachers and teacher assistants, audio-visual technology, recreational therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language specialists, and motivators (specially trained attendant personnel).

"This is a total-push program which has had outstanding success.

"Moving from a younger population to a childhood population, Willowbrook has devised a Hospital Improvement Program (HIP) for toddlers age 6 to 12. This program, which is supported by funds of the federal government, is designed to train children to be self-sufficient and to profit from beginning educational activities.

"In this program, a total of 50 children are broken down into five groups of 10 each, and the children are exposed to an intensive program of education, recreation, occupational therapy and attendant activities (Aids to Daily Living).

"An integral part of this program, also, is to train the attendant personnel, in the techniques that teachers and recreational and occupational therapists employ, so they can use these same procedures with similar types of children in another building.

"The successful graduates of this HIP program, approximately 95 per cent, then move on to a special building (Bldg. 78), and the programs in this building are designed to continue to maximize the gains that were made during the time these children were in the HIP program.

"For adolescents, a special program has been designed for those who may be emotionally disturbed and/or have acting-out problems called M A P (mobilization of Abilities and Potential).