

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).

The program is designed to offer these residents counseling and psychotherapy and suitable means of coping with their environment. To this end — in addition to specialized ward personnel — educators, recreational personnel, psychologists and social workers are heavily utilized.

A program also was designed for profoundly and severely retarded adolescents called GARD (Group Approaches to Rehabilitation and Development) in which a ward of 68 adolescents was broken up into four equal groups, and each group was led by a specially trained attendant-counselor. This program was beginning to show signs of fruition but, unfortunately, it had to be dropped because of a growing shortage of ward personnel due to the budget freeze.

The attendants have begun many programs on their own initiative. In Building 7, employees have developed a team approach to patient care with the large ward census divided into smaller, more manageable groups to which employees can

give individual attention.

Several programs are available to our adult population. There is a specialized young adult education program which is oriented toward developing pre-vocational and vocational skills. We have also devised a highly individualized and specialized program for adults called TACL (Training Adults for Community Living).

TACL was created to prepare any and all adults at Willowbrook who might be capable of living and supporting themselves in the community for such community residence. To this end, a separate TACL unit for males and a separate unit for females was created.

In this program resident self government is emphasized, as is the acquisition of vocational skills, either by referral to specialized agencies in the community, such as the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, or by work training in various jobs on the grounds.

In addition, the trainees in his program are given preventive counseling and psychotherapy, designed to help them anticipate and deal with the kinds of problems that they might be expected to encounter in community living. The males also are taught simple household repair, while the females undergo an extensive program of home economics.

For those individuals who are placed in the community, a very active program of follow up assistance is offered, including a group counseling and recreation program for a group of older residents who are in the community, having been placed there on Family Care.

These are the specialized programs at Willowbrook and other specialized projects have been developed to alleviate specific conditions, such as headbandaging. These programs, however, are in addition to those regular, on-going programs that our facility offers as a matter of course.

Thus, nearly every resident on the grounds participates in program of recreation, and the overwhelming majority of residents participate either in an on-going program of occupational therapy or education. In the latter area, we have three Edison Responsive Environments ("talking typewriters") and specialized classes for the retarded who are deaf and hard of hearing or blind and partially sighted are conducted.

Further, a psychological evaluation and assessment of each resident is made, and this often is done on a continuing basis. Some of the residents are seen for individual and group counseling and psychotherapy, and an active program of Family Care is pursued.

Regularly scheduled interdisciplinary meetings are held, and new programs are encouraged. A two-way feedback system on this is stimulated by an employe newspaper. Active programs of in-service training and education are carried out with all of the various disciplines, including personnel on the community.

Having made that assessment of the work being done at Willowbrook, the committee concluded, "We do not deny that we need help, but we ask for constructive help.

"You can help by visiting Willowbrook. Then if you feel the conditions are as deplorable as has been painted by a few, fight to have Willowbrook closed and the offenders prosecuted.

"If you find, as we feel you will, there are good things in addition to those which could be improved, then let your legislator know that you will not stand for the distortions of the situation."

But the group added that "the governor must readjust his priorities. He must, and the people must, realize that the children of Willowbrook are more important than the Grand Mall in Albany and the construction of more roads."

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