

State scored on care of retarded kids

By JANE KURTIN

Advance Staff Writer

ALBANY — Hundreds of people jammed into Chancellor's Hall here yesterday for the first of two days of hearings called by the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental and Physical Handicap, which is investigating conditions at Willowbrook State School and other state mental institutions.

While spectators were generally calm, testimony which came from roughly 50 speakers indicated a profound dissatisfaction with the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene and its approach to the care and education of 25,000 retarded individuals in institutions and some 600,000 living in their home communities.

There was a distinct lack of support for the department, and yesterday's speakers united in their backing of a bill introduced to the Legislature Jan. 17 by Sen. Edward Conklin which calls for the creation of a Department of Mental

Retardation to function independently of Mental Hygiene and with its own budget.

Proportionately few parents of retarded patients testified yesterday, and the early hours of the hearing were dominated by representatives of the Department of Mental Hygiene, beginning with Dr. Alan D. Miller, commissioner, and Dr. Jack Hammond, director of Willowbrook.

Both men acknowledged a critical shortage of money and personnel in state mental institutions, but reminded the panel of the department's

continuing effort to improve conditions and its gains toward that end.

Dr. Hammond, pleaded for parents who can manage their retarded children to remove them from the state school.

"Where to?" cried a voice from the audience.

"In many buildings the living conditions for patients are inhumane and intolerable," Hammond said.

Because of the overcrowding, Willowbrook has refused to admit any more mentally retarded, Hammond said. This action, taken in January, has continued despite desperate pleas from parents with retarded children, he said.

Willowbrook has been widely publicized because of the squalor and treatment of the children.

Hammond complained about much of the publicity, saying it was focused "on the most tragic situations in the institution, on wards, housing profoundly retarded, non-toilet trained, over-active individuals who lack any communication skills or self-help skills."

More than half of the 5,000 patient population at the school, cannot speak, are not able to feed themselves, and are not toilet trained.

"The immediate crisis is one of severe overcrowding not only at Willowbrook State School, but at other institutions as well," said Hammond, "and it calls for an immediate solution, now."

CHANGING ATTITUDE

Dr. Miller, who called the hearings "the most important hearings concerned with the

problems of mental retardation and mental illness" in which he has participated since his appointment six years ago, lauded a change in public attitude toward the mentally ill.

"Discomfort and avoidance with respect to the mentally ill," Miller said, "has been replaced by active interests, greater knowledge and now, insistence that problems be faced and solutions found."

Several speakers — each of whom was theoretically limited to 10 minutes — received thunderous applause and in two instances standing ovations. Among these was Mrs. Rosalie Amoroso, the mother of a child in Willowbrook.

"Personally," Mrs. Amoroso said, "I think the parents should be holding these hearings in their respective state schools and summoning the politicians to testify and tell us what they have done. After all, we know what our kids need."

'KIND OF SICK'

"I suppose," Mrs. Amoroso continued, "that I should be charitable to our legislators instead of bitter and resentful. But when I come to Albany and see the mall and the new office buildings and then think of the place where my son lives, I get kind of sick."

"The legislators find the money for this mall and for super highways and then say that they have to trim the fat from the Department of Mental Hygiene. They are trimming the fat right out of our children's hides.

"We have to come to Albany like beggars asking for hand-out. This is why," Mrs.

Amoroso said through clenched teeth, "I come here bitter and resentful and very uncharitable."

Only one other speaker moved the audience to stand and applaud. Dr. Mary Goodwin, a specialist in the field of child retardation, and her husband, also a physician and a specialist, were dismissed from the Department of Mental Hygiene, ostensibly because of the fiscal crisis.

COMPARES CONDITIONS

Dr. Goodwin compared conditions in the state's mental institutions in 1965 to conditions today.

"In 1965 the mental institutions of New York State were overcrowded. In 1965 many of the patients were ill-housed, ill-fed and ill-clothed. In 1965 a patient was scalded to death in a shower. In 1965 ward attendants were underpaid, overworked and too few.

"In 1972," Dr. Goodwin went on, "the patients in New York State mental institutions are ill-housed, ill-fed and ill-clothed. In 1972 a patient was scalded to death in a shower. In 1972 the attendants are underpaid, overworked and too few.

"Moreover in 1972, Sampson State School has been closed, Binghamton Children's Unit has been closed, Middleton Children's Unit has been closed, and summer camps for the retarded have been closed.

"Is it economy," Dr. Goodwin asked in conclusion, "to entrust the care of our children to physicians trained in adult medicine? To administrators, statisticians and public relations experts who are inexperienced