

Patient, employe spotlight problems

Javits to visit Willowbrook

By PETER FISCHETTI

Conditions at Willowbrook State School fell under twin spotlights last night as Sen. Jacob K. Javits announced that an investigation would take place there and a panel discussion at the Jewish Community Center analyzed various aspects of life in the institution.

Javits announced that the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has named the members of the Federal Action Team of specialists in mental health and mental retardation who will visit Willowbrook State School and other New York State Department of Mental Hygiene facilities and meet with key state personnel.

The team will visit Willowbrook Feb. 28 and 29. It will be joined by Sen. Javits, ranking Republican member on the Labor and Public Welfare Committee and the members of the New York delegation.

Established at the suggestion of Sen. Javits, the team will be headed by Berkley S. Brown, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, and includes 10 other members.

At the Jewish Community Center, two doctors, a social worker, a professor and the chief supervising nurse at Willowbrook criticized, defended and in general analyzed conditions in the institution. But perhaps the most illuminating comments came from two members of the audience who know the place pretty well.

A young man who spent 20

years at Willowbrook suggested that parents wishing to have their children committed be legally bound to visit them each month.

An attendant who has worked at the school for seven years pleaded for more volunteers to perform the unglamorous but necessary duties of washing and dressing the patients.

The panel discussion, which attracted about 100 interested spectators to the Jewish Community Center, offered a cross-section of opinion and expertise.

Ira Fisher, a social worker at the institution, described the conditions in terms of "neglect" and "euthanasia." Only the progressive aspects of Willowbrook are shown to visitors, he said, while many patients "vegetate" — living a long life but dying day by day.

Dr. Jerome Krant, a surgeon who periodically visits Willowbrook as a consultant, said the institution "has come a long way" during the past 10 years. He then alluded to state budget outlays for highway construction, welfare and the Albany Mall, asking: "Where are the priorities?"

Dr. Michael Wilkins, a former employe whose dismissal, some say, was prompted by his disclosures about conditions at the school, said that every child, regardless of his potential, has the right to expect it to be developed fully.

The state, he said, has destroyed that right by institutionalizing patients instead

of training them. He called for a quality control program under which parents would be "co-pilots" and have substantial power in designing and implementing programs.

James O'Hara chief supervising nurse at Willowbrook, represented Dr. Jack Hammond, the school director, who was unable to attend. O'Hara blamed state budget cuts and the overcrowded conditions they have bred for much of the problem.

The solution, he said, does not lie in the presence of "TV crews at 6:30 a.m.," adding that employes "don't appreciate the publicity."

The final panelist was Professor William Rosenthal, who teaches social work at Yeshiva University. Admittedly not an expert on conditions at Willowbrook, he was invited, however, to offer his opinions on the views of the other panelists.

He called Fisher's outrage at the conditions "natural and appropriate" for a social worker who is frustrated and stymied by the ineffectiveness of working within the system.

Rosenthal also agreed with Dr. Wilkins' belief that parents should be partners and that the institutional approach should be destroyed.

COMMUNITY GAP

While Fisher and Wilkins criticized Dr. Hammond on several points, including his inability to get along with the

Willowbrook staff, Dr. Krant read excerpts of letters written by Dr. Hammond to the state Department of Mental Hygiene in 1964, his first year at Willowbrook, and in 1968 and 1971, complaining of the overcrowded conditions, patient care and morale problems, and asking for more funds.

Dr. Hammond, said Dr. Krant, has superiors in Albany just like Fisher and Dr. Wilkins at Willowbrook, and he must operate the institution on the funds he has.

Many in the audience were critical of reports that sedative drugs are dispensed for abusive children. Dr. Wilkins said they are abusive "because they have nothing to do." O'Hara said the drugs make children more amenable to training.

Dr. Wilkins cited several bills that might mitigate conditions. One would create a Department of Mental Retardation, an important step, he said, because presently most of the funds are diverted to mental health. Another proposal would place more parents on the Board of Visitors.

Lester Speiser, editor of the Jewish Community Center bulletin and moderator of the discussion, said he has interviewed both Dr. Hammond and Fisher in the past week and has found "a large area of agreement" between them.

O'Hara said that a few years ago Dr. Hammond sent out 4,800 questionnaires to parents, asking if they wanted their children to live at home. Only 24 parents replied affirmatively and, in the end, two children left the institution.