

A Transfer of 1,500 Willowbrook Patients Planned

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ALBANY, Feb. 23—A state legislative chairman who has been inquiring into conditions at the Willowbrook State School disclosed a plan today to reduce its overcrowding through the gradual transfer of 1,500 mentally retarded patients to other institutions.

Senator Dalwin J. Niles, a Johnstown Republican who is chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Mental and Physical Handicap, said he had agreed in a meeting today with state mental health officials to see whether room can be found in the tight state budget for \$14-million needed to staff more than 500 new beds now ready but unoccupied in local city neighborhoods.

Last month, after public outcries, the Department of Mental Hygiene ordered a freeze in accepting new patients at the Staten Island institution, whose present population is about 5,000.

A Gradual Shift

The shift of patients would be gradual, the Senator emphasized, with some going to the new neighborhood centers, if the money can be found. Other, older patients, he added, will be transferred to institutions for the mentally ill, which normally do not care for the retarded but which now have excess room.

The Senator, who heard numerous complaints from parent and professional groups

last week in two days of hearings, said the committee was particularly interested in inquiring further into charges that state officials emphasize the medical aspect of the problem and neglect basic educational remedies.

He said that Dr. Frederic Grunberg, the deputy commissioner of mental hygiene in charge of retardation, had assured him that past emphasis on building large institutions was no longer the policy.

The Senator indicated that he was not enthusiastic about the proposal, offered by many speakers last week, that mental retardation services be taken from the Department of Mental Hygiene and established in a new state agency.

Tax Rise Shunned

If the \$14-million cannot be found to open the new institutions in the city, he said, he would not recommend an increase in taxes to raise it but look for alternative "relief."

Comments on complaints that the legislative budget cuts last year and this — which cost Willowbrook more than 600 workers — were the basic cause of the problem, Mr. Niles said it was a "pitfall" to think of the solution merely in terms of money. "Maybe the budget cuts had a salutary effect," he said, "by bringing us to grips with the basic problem."

The Senator was interviewed as the Legislature ended another light two-day work week. The Assembly was finished at

12:05 P.M., after little more than an hour of whisking at the least controversial items on the agenda. The Senate had a similarly light session, and lawmakers were on the road home within minutes after the gavels sounded.

In the Assembly, as some members posed silently for reelection photographs as if they were taking part in the debate, a few bills were passed and sent to the Senate. One measure, offered by the Republican majority leader, John L. Kinnston of Westbury, L. I.,

would permit the state to pay grandparents who provide welfare children with day care.

The most controversial moment of the day appeared to be the invocation by Rabbi David L. Blumenfeld of Glen Cove, L. I. In what many took to be a reference to the austerity reductions in state services and the continuing huge state office mall project across the street, the Rabbi quoted Joshua as saying: "A civilization that pays more attention to construction than to men shall surely perish."