

## The Willowbrooks With Us

It is part of the tragedy and the disgrace that inhuman conditions at Willowbrook, a state facility for the mentally retarded on Staten Island, have persisted through repeated "exposés" and full-dress inquiries. The current storm over the degradation of the human beings institutionalized there must not be allowed to fade away in still more inaction.

New York State's current fiscal stringency has had an especially severe impact on Willowbrook, on other state facilities for the retarded and on the entire mental hygiene system. The budgetary freeze has caused an attrition of personnel at institutions already understaffed. A single attendant at Willowbrook may now be required to care for as many as fifty or more brain-damaged youngsters crowded into a single small room.

Governor Rockefeller's response to this most recent exposure of conditions at Willowbrook is utterly inadequate. He has merely restored some money previously cut from this year's budget and has promised modest increases in the year ahead. There is little question, however, that this additional state funding will still leave every institution in desperate straits.

Beyond staffing requirements, real and immediate as they are, lies the need to make fundamental policy decisions. Are huge institutions that offer only custodial care the most effective answer to the needs of the mentally retarded? Governor Rockefeller seems to think that building huge buildings solves every problem when often it only makes them worse. California has pioneered with a decentralized system of small institutions and day-care facilities. Its experience indicates beneficial results in terms of helping many of the less severely retarded as well as holding down costs. Permanent institutionalization may cost as much as \$8,500 annually while day care, more appropriate in many cases, may cost \$2,000 or less.

Legislation announced by Democratic leaders yesterday is to be introduced in Albany on Monday to reform New York's backward system for dealing with the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled along the lines of the California model. In the meantime, more funds must be found even in this period of budgetary austerity. The state dishonors itself by its dehumanization of these helpless children.

## Letters to the Editor

### Helping the Mentally Retarded

To the Editor:

No man in state government has worked harder for the retarded than Senator William T. Conklin. It is regrettable, therefore, that his recent letter to The Times contains inaccurate, incomplete, and misinterpreted information.

The statement that conditions have not improved at Willowbrook and Letchworth Village state schools in the last twenty years is inaccurate. At Willowbrook in 1963 there were 6,100 residents and 2,000 employees. In December, 1970, just before a hiring freeze, the work force had been increased to 3,268 and the resident population had been reduced to 5,200. Similar improvements had been made at Letchworth Village.

The charge that the state Department of Mental Hygiene "has little interest in the most severely handicapped" is contradicted by our philosophy and our current practice. The proportion of profoundly and severely retarded being admitted to and cared for at our state schools, for example, has been growing steadily. And our guidelines to state-aided local agencies require them to give highest priority to the severely handicapped.

The comparisons between residential facilities like Willowbrook and Letchworth Village and facilities like Bronx State and Bronx Children's Psychiatric hospitals are grossly misleading. Both Bronx hospitals provide a range of outpatient as well as residential services to the entire population of the borough. Thus, Bronx State Hospital serves, not "694 patients" (the number on a single day), but 3,000 inpatients and 4,350 outpatients each

year. The same pattern of service characterizes the programs of the Bronx Children's Psychiatric Hospital and all new facilities for the retarded.

The statement that the department "spends almost 800 per cent more on mental health than on mental retardation" is misleading. For one thing, it is based only on our state-aid budget (\$7 million for retardation, \$60 million for mental illness) and ignores our larger state-purposes budget (\$159.8-million for the retarded, \$388 million for the mentally ill).

When the gross figures, moreover, are related to the number of persons served, the expenditure per patient is slightly higher for the retarded. And the statement overlooks the fact that more than 50,000 retarded children are served by state-aided local school systems. The programs conducted and supported by this department are meant to complement, not replace, these special educational programs.

Finally, all our construction projects are aimed at reducing the resident population of our large institutions. Our new, small facilities are designed to develop a new model of services, including residential and outpatient care, which integrate their services with all other community services. Lifelong institutionalization will no longer be the pattern of care, and the retarded person, whatever his level of disability, will have his rightful place in the community.

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An editorial on this subject appears today.