

Whirlwind tour of Willowbrook

Javits pledges federal action for retarded

By JANE KURTIN

Purportedly on a fact-finding mission at Willowbrook State School, nearly 45 legislators and members of a federal action team yesterday whizzed through six of the institution's buildings so quickly that as the last in the crowd entered a room the first were already leaving. Invited to inspect the institution by U.S. Sen. Jacob K. Javits, the federal team and the entourage of politicians were based to Willowbrook after a morning hearing and press conference at 26 Federal Plaza in Manhattan.

Promising that he had no "illusions that Willowbrook was not made to look better today than it is generally," Javits said that he would do his "utmost to see that there is a material change in the state's mental institutions."

Javits announced that within the next few days he will introduce the Humane Care and Treatment of the Mentally Retarded Act, a piece of legislation, he said, "which will give the federal and state governments a criteria toward which to stride."

Asked how a new criteria would differ from existing ideal standards already prepared with the use of a federal grant by the Accreditation Council for Facilities for the Mentally Retarded, the senator answered: "There is a difference between a guideline and a law."

Although New York State's institutions have continued to function despite their failure to meet health laws of this state, Javits said that the availability of federal funds to institutions meeting new standards would

act as an incentive and the withholding of funds as an enforcement technique.

Legislators not present at the morning hearing joined with the group arriving by bus in the Willowbrook auditorium, where they were greeted by the institution's chorus singing "Shalom, Shalom."

A group of angry parents arrived at the auditorium carrying placards demanding an end to the neglect of their children.

Javits, who remained composed throughout the day, announced to the parent group: "We (the visiting delegation) feel the tragedy of Willowbrook as if our own children were here. We will try to look at things through your eyes."

Hard as he may have looked, what Javits saw yesterday was, by his own admission, not what unannounced guests to the wards see.

After visiting two buildings, members of the touring party who had been to Willowbrook previously complained that conditions were altered so drastically as to be nearly unrecognizable and the itinerary was changed at the last moment to "take some buildings by surprise."

While a press pool was created to keep down the number of newsmen in the patients' wards, every legislator and legislative aide who happened to be included in the tour, as the group entered several of the wards, a number of patients panicked and went racing out into the corridors.

Dr. Bertram Brown, chairman of the federal team, claimed that, with the change of plans, some wards would be seen as they usually are.

The arrival of a busload of officials at each of the residences apparently looked to

one by surprise. Observers noted that the stench, which is a regular part of life at Willowbrook, was all but eliminated. Only one patient in six buildings was naked.

The tour included a stop at two buildings which house and train patients who function at a higher IQ and where youngsters were active and productive. At one stop, patients showed legislators dresses, suits and jackets that they'd made and Brooklyn Congressman Frank Brasco commented that "the International Ladies Garment Workers Union would be glad" (Continued on Page 11)

to have people who work this well.

Despite the drastic improvement made in the surface appearance of the institution, Javits called Willowbrook "dismal and subhuman" and said "the indictment is of us, of a society which tolerates conditions in which the human personality is allowed to vegetate. What we saw," Javits concluded, "wrung our hearts."

In addition to State Sen. John Marchi, Congressman John M. Murphy and Assemblyman Edward J. Amann of Staten Island, the touring group included Reps. Herman Badillo, Jonathan Bingham, Mario Biaggi, Frank Brasco, Hamilton Fish, Seymour Halpern and Ogden Reid, State Sen. William Bonkella and Assemblymen Joseph Lisa and Andrew Stein.