

Willowbrook Shows Public Its Other Side

By ROGER WETHINGTON

Willowbrook has become synonymous in the public mind with neglect and subhuman living conditions. But medical experts say that's only part of the Willowbrook story. The state institution for the retarded also features a fine school, training programs and recreation.

To bolster the good things and improve the bad, Willowbrook is now looking for volunteers from Brooklyn and Queens to make up for some of the school's understaffing, a chronic condition now aggravated by budget cuts. The school is in Staten Island just 10 minutes across the Verrazano Narrows Bridge from Brooklyn.

The school has 879 volunteers as well as organized groups whose memberships total another 2,800. More can be used in teaching, running parties, supervising recreation or taking residents off the grounds for visits to a zoo, park or movie.

Call for Appointment

Dr. Jack Hammond, the school's director, asked prospective volunteers to call for an appointment before coming.

Some volunteers are needed in the most pleasant of Willowbrook's wards while others devote themselves to the most difficult and neglected. These are the wards for the most profoundly retarded and multiply handicapped patients.

Because of their vulnerability to accident and disease, most of these patients are bathed, fed and physically cared for only by trained staff, Hammond said, but volunteers can perform other duties.

Before the budget cuts, ward attendants provided "motivation" therapy for these patients, trying to teach such simple things as holding a toy. But reduced staff found less and less time for such activities and they were abandoned.

Only Custodial Care

The patients were reduced to mere custodial care. Many tore off their clothes and soiled themselves almost as rapidly as the staff could clean and dress them. They were left soiled and naked far, far too long, Hammond admitted.

The overworked staff had too little time to spoon-feed these patients, many of whom were believed in danger of malnutrition. Restoration of some funds has eased these problems and "motivation" work is resuming.

Of Willowbrook's 5,000 residents, 3,000 are of school age and a third of those are in formal classes where the curriculum includes physical therapy, occupational therapy and recreation as more academic subjects. About 100 have the capacity to reach a good third-grade reading and math level, the school's education director, Mrs. Hannah Glasser, reported.

Some Subjects Listed

School for the youngest children includes music classes, getting along with others, dressing, eating, toilet training and learning to talk more readily.

Older children get various programs including field trips, training in home economics, office work, band, chess club, elementary science and library work as well as the three R's.

Visitors dropped in on some 4 and 5-year-olds learning to share cookies.

"Look," said their teacher, "It's two ladies and one man." Mrs. Dolores Mason, an education supervisor, said the description of the visitors had an academic purpose: "That's the beginning of arithmetic."

Tommy, a playful boy with webbed fingers, asked to show off for the guests by picking out a picture of a truck from a collection of drawings. He pretended he couldn't decide which was the truck. "Don't fool me today," Mrs. Mason said firmly. Tommy picked out the truck.

A special project is the \$100,000 federally funded Hospital Improvement Program, which provides training for 50 youngsters, who have graduated from the school for younger children but need more intensive work before they're ready for a higher school.

The attendants who provide the training are scheduled to be moved to other wards to move deprived wards to use the techniques developed in this program.

I'm Going to Get Out

Some older children, as well as many adults, do beautiful embroidery, sewing and rug-making. Jan, a 16-year-old youth who made some handsome, mod, fur-trimmed outfits, forecast proudly: "I'm going to get out of Willowbrook."

A visit to Willowbrook also uncovers hundreds of more terribly handicapped youngsters who sit or lie around for long hours. They're waiting for their next scheduled activities. Volunteers could help to keep them busier.

There are some others that the average person is probably not qualified to help. The saddest of these are the handful of emotionally disturbed patients who get little attention. They are often kept in seclusion or loosely tied to prevent them from hurting themselves or others.

Willowbrook has only five psychologists.

3,000 Is the Goal

During Hammond's tenure, the number of patients has been reduced from 6,000 while the number of teachers rose from 33 to nearly 120 before the cuts forced a rollback. Hammond said he aims at reducing the patient population to 3,000 or so with no further reduction in staff.

Although that begins to approach his ideal, he said, there is little hope for it. That would cost \$30 million a year, he said.

Hammond would like many parents to take their children home. All will do better with individual love and attention, he said.

His greatest achievement, he said, has been the establishment of a \$2 million baby school. It is designed to provide education as soon as a child shows awareness. In the past the retarded were believed ready for school only after age 7.

Now 25 youngsters under 5 are in school. One is only 2.