

Army of volunteers aid retarded

By PHIL ARKOW

In Southbury, Conn., middle-aged and elderly residents of the Heritage Village retirement center visit the Southbury Training School, a federally-funded institution for children with neurological impairments. The Heritage Village folks, many of whom are grandparents, just want to feel useful somewhere. At Southbury, they are welcomed, loved and appreciated. They reject the verdict of a custodial care imposed for so long upon the retarded. "Volunteers are invaluable," says the Southbury director.

In Ohio, inmates at the Chillicothe Correctional Institute make hand puppets for retarded children at the Orient State Hospital. The children love the toys, and the inmates love to make them for those less fortunate than themselves.

At the Elwyn Institute, a private school for the retarded in Philadelphia, grandmothers and college students come regularly to work with the children and take them on field trips to museums and sporting events. The students get experience while enrolled in a local college's speech pathology course. The grandmothers, says an Elwyn counselor, "are someone these kids can talk to and who show that someone cares about them."

At the nation's facilities for the mentally retarded, volunteers are coming into greater prominence as state and local budgets force restrictions on hiring permanent help, and as the needs of a group of society's outcasts become more publicized.

At schools across the country, there are untold stories of ward personnel and parents who take their own time and money to provide decorations and trips for retarded children when strangling budgets forbid such expenditures.

Associations for retarded children are emerging in cities and counties across the country, staging fund-raising drives, coordinating volunteers' efforts, and counseling parents of retarded children who are often unaware of what community

services are available. Family care centers are being promoted, too, with state mental health departments offering stipends to families to take care of mildly retarded persons who need love, guidance and moderate supervision, and who can function in society without being condemned to life sentences in institutions. "Is there room in your home to provide love, care, help?" asks a brochure from one state school, offering rewards of companionship, trust and returned love to married couples, widows and single women who participate. It also offers \$150 a month.

REGIONAL CENTERS

In California, regional centers involving the family and the community are gaining national prominence for their coordinated treatment for the mentally retarded.

In Roswell, N.M., a pioneer program is under way offering on-the-job training to the retarded at an abandoned Air Force Base.

At Fort Carson, Colo., one company of soldiers gets military credit for working off-post at the Deaf and Blind School and the Rocky Mountain Rehabilitation Center in Colorado Springs. Others work with the retarded on their own time.

Volunteers are only one part of the new concept in care for the mentally retarded — the community service team. If there is no money for needed additional paid personnel in state and private institutions the logical approach, many school superintendents are discovering, is to tap the army of people who want to make

social commitments, feel like they are doing something important, and who offer a wide array of community resources. The result is to make both patients and caretakers feel loved and useful.

"The fewer number of residents we have, with the number of employes we have, the better," says Dr. Emanuel Richter, director of the state school at Wilton, N.Y., where 19 per cent of the staff positions went unfilled for more than a year after a job freeze was imposed. Federal funds had to be obtained to "refill some of the vacancies."

"We feel there's no place like home. We should look for every alternative to throwing them into an institution. We should create a community service team, just as valuable as working inside the institution," he says.

When the retarded children cannot be placed in a home, quite often the home comes to the institution.

Mrs. Terrill Curran Galway, N.Y., took care of her brain-damaged son, Morgan, until he was 4½ years old. When he started breaking out of the playpen, and endangering the four other children, she had him committed to Wilton. That was three years ago.

Now she spends two days a week as a volunteer at Wilton, and is head coordinator in her son's ward. She recruits other volunteers, conducts team meetings, participates in a volunteer program where area beauty school students come and do the Wilton residents' hair, and acts as an outside consultant in a school-wide program evaluation committee.

"It makes me feel more useful as a parent — I'm not just leaving him up there in someone else's care," she says enthusiastically. "And I find it enjoyable. I've been at it a year. It's been rewarding."

INCLUDES CHILDREN

One of her programs has been to recruit children, as young as 11 years old, to come with their parents and volunteer in wards where their retarded brothers and sisters are residents. This program is being received warmly at Wilton, as at other schools across the country.

"They can sit down and talk with retarded kids their own age, on their own level. It gives the retarded children companions, and it gives the normal kids exposure to the retarded, so they won't fear it," she says.

Volunteers are everywhere — if you know where to look for them. College students comprise a sizable army of potential workers: Wilton, for example, has a significant on-going program with students at Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, including "rap and snack" cafeteria sessions, rock-back riding lessons, and volunteer work in Wilton's wards and outpatients.

There is even a work force available from the ranks of the retarded. The less severely handicapped residents at Wilton work at the school in domestic and menial jobs, folding sheets and cleaning rooms and assisting carpenters, thereby getting valuable on-the-job training for their lives when they leave the school, and filling in some of the gaps in the hired staff.

Volunteers also come from groups of other handicapped persons who are looking for projects to keep from feeling sorry for themselves. In New York City, elderly Staten Islanders have formed a group called SERVE — Serve and Enrich Retirement by Volunteer Experience. They work at the Willowbrook State School and 24 community centers.

JUBLESS VETS

Jubless Vietnam veterans have also been known to show up at mental institutions looking for volunteer work. Many have subsequently been hired, and from their ranks have emerged a new breed of ward attendants. Hospital spokesmen say they are trained and disciplined, and especially in the case of medics, instant successes in working with retarded children.

The volunteer effort has practical, professional and personal benefits. The schools, strapped for workers to watch the children who need constant attention, get a staff of free labor eager to feed, clean, fold and mend. The retarded children get the love which they need more than normal children. And the volunteers all talk about senses of inner satisfaction they receive.

Says Mrs. Curran: "When Morgan was home, he was a danger to himself. There was just too much tension. Now, I can prepare my home for him when we bring him home, and I find I can enjoy him more."

Morgan, 7, has the mentality of a one-year-old. "They've taught him how to feed himself, and they'll shortly toilet train him. It's more than I can ask from this kid," she says lovingly and realistically, "if he can be self-sustaining."

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