

Willowbrook, Continued

By WILLIAM G. BRONSTON

The public has been grossly misled by the self-serving and self-justifying article, "Another View of Willowbrook," which appeared on the Op-Ed page May 6.

The parochialism of its author, Dr. Jack Hammond, Willowbrook director, and the Department of Mental Hygiene in trying to convince anyone that Willowbrook alone is under attack, or that the issue has arisen from mass media exposure and parent outrage, denies historical reality.

In the United States there has been a steady drive from the community of families of the handicapped and progressive professionals to foreclose on the legacy of charity for the handicapped and the second-class, hat-in-hand citizenship which befalls these families.

At issue are two fundamentally antagonistic outlooks: on the one hand, a philosophy which accepts the brutalization and reduction of human beings to a subhuman condition, as has been amply documented in the state institutions.

Opposing this, our position, that people with special needs, the handicapped, the retarded and others, must be accorded the full spectrum of human and constitutional rights with regard to care, treatment and education. The former view, held generally, by the chiefs of the Department of Mental Hygiene, leads to policies and practices which justify human losses and the systematic exclusion of a block of people from the mainstream of society. The latter view is based on respect for all people and must lead to a complete overhaul of the contemporary practices of seeing and serving the handicapped. We would expand services in public schools to meet special needs, establish preventive and cooperative health services, develop major planning for normal homes for all handicapped people in every neighborhood and program massive occupational training.

As a physician and permanent employe in Willowbrook, I have been in charge of five buildings since beginning work there. I have had access to every building and responsibility for the care of all the residents at one time or another. It is from this first-hand knowledge that "Another View of Willowbrook" is so odious and mendacious.

What underlies Dr. Hammond's repeated depiction of the residents at Willowbrook as "77 per cent who are severely and profoundly handicapped" is immediately at odds with the one-third figure given by the commissioner as being people who belong in the community.

Furthermore, in order to collect maximum Federal repayment, the physicians are officially instructed to estimate low I.Q.'s. Finally, there are five psychologists at Willowbrook for 5,300 residents. I.Q. testing is performed in the most perfunctory way with reports rarely exceeding a short paragraph. The numerical I.Q. values assigned are designed to legitimize excluding people from the token school and rehabilitation programs available, and are five to ten years out of date on the average. How can anyone who understands human growth and development seriously talk about 4,000 people in one sentence as if describing an amorphous mass or herd of beasts, without communicating precisely this image to the public?

The allegation that the media "zeroed in on this target population at the most inopportune times," revealing nakedness, filth and misery, is an outright falsification:

I have made rounds at every hour of the day and night (unlike the director of Willowbrook who relies on administrative subordinates, who occasionally visit the wards, for his information). I can attest (and will do so in court) that the conditions shown over TV are daily fare for over 75 per cent of the residents and, in fact, the media did not show the worst of the situation. Only first-hand can the unspeakable wretchedness and sadness be appreciated.

The boast that the media have never been barred from Willowbrook is preposterous.

As for never forewarning employes or buildings of visits from outsiders, I have personally overheard more times than I can count phone calls from the administration's secretaries and the nursing office to building supervisors telling them to clean up because this or that politician or visitor was on the way. So universal is this practice that if an unexpected person enters a ward, the attendants will carry serious grudges against their co-workers for not informing them. Granted, this may not be a policy, but it is a practice.

The claim that the comparison between children in the community and those in Willowbrook is unfair is particularly interesting. First, it must be said, that I personally visited a number of the facilities shown on TV and, in fact, was trained in one of them. The children were identical at all levels of functioning. What was incomparable was the over-all expectation of the staffs and the night and day different environments which, at Willowbrook, led to a child being labeled "unsuitable" according to Hammond, vs. making "wonderful progress" in the personal community centers.

The "great disservice" done to the employes by the true exposure of the conditions at Willowbrook may have aroused some anxious moments for my co-workers, but it certainly does not take any vision to see the connection between the exposure and the smashing of the job freeze that has hung like death over the state, the forcing of service reorganization and exploration of programs to begin to meet the needs of resident and workers alike. What the Civil Service union had been unable or unwilling to do, fight for better patient care and working conditions, the lawsuits and parents' organizations have begun to do.

When the parents rose up, Dr. Hammond talked about agitators and Communists among the parents. When the C.S.E.A. strike was called, he pleaded for these same parents to bail the institution out, denouncing the workers for their irresponsible indifference to the welfare of the children. With the employe crisis over, back he goes to attacking the parents for being filled with doubts and guilts.

The contention that "Another View" makes that 98 per cent of the handicapped who are in the community receive services is a flagrant lie. In February organization after organization testified before the Joint Legislative Committee on Physical and Mental Handicaps in Albany, building a mosaic protest against fragmented and token services, exclusion, mismanagement and a profound lack of any less drastic alternatives than the institutions offered by the state. The question before the people is simple: Do we accept failure and inhumanity or do we take a giant step forward for people with special needs?

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