

Hammond—the victim or is he the system?

By GERALD S. NAGEL

"When you know Jack Hammond," someone who knows him said upon hearing the announcement Wednesday of his transfer as director of Willowbrook State School, "you don't know if he is a victim of the system, or if he is the system."

"Perhaps he has been both overwhelmed by the staggering job he has had at Willowbrook and has succumbed a bit to the way in which bureaucracies work," the observer added. "He seems to be a genuine man, though, and probably has been blamed for a lot of things that were not in his power to change."

Hammond's eight-year tenure at the state's largest institution for the mentally retarded will end within a few days, as soon as he completes some pending business. He expects to assume office by Aug. 1 as director of the smaller Rome State School, where he served until 1964 as assistant director and to which he was appointed Wednesday by Dr. Alan D. Miller, commissioner of the state Department of Mental Hygiene.

His departure from Willowbrook comes after much of the furor has subsided after disclosures in the Advance Nov. 15, that were subsequently developed by others in the local and national news media, in which Willowbrook was portrayed as a center of neglect and abuse and Hammond quickly became one of the nation's most controversial health institution administrators.

In a half-hour interview in his office, the 55-year-old, white-haired psychiatrist still seemed weary, possibly from the tour he had just conducted for a television team, possibly from what he has been through in recent months.

He seemed pained to be interviewed yet another time.

He tried again to discount criticism of the institution while emphasizing its enormous

needs, to avoid personal blame but not hold his superiors, the news media or a previously apathetic public responsible.

So he focused again on his achievements and the need for more.

"The fault of Willowbrook is not mine," Hammond said softly, sipping coffee from a thermos cup he had just filled. "I did make progress here."

He noted that he was the first director of a state institution in New York to obtain a restriction on admissions and said he reduced his patient population from 6,200 to 5,000 while increasing his staff strength from 2,100 to 3,500.

He said he shifted the emphasis from custody to therapy, increasing his teaching staff from 33 to 120, and his occupational therapy and recreation staffs from less than a dozen each to more than 70 each.

He said he found another building to relieve overcrowding, opened an infant training center and initiated programs for self help. He said significant gains are not always apparent to persons beyond the institution because "79 per cent of our children are profoundly retarded, 60 per cent are no more than partially toilet trained, 40 per cent have trouble walking or cannot walk at all and many cannot speak or feed themselves."

"Kennedy came soon after I got admissions restricted," Hammond added, referring to the visit of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in 1965 and the late senator's charges of "filth" and "zoo-like" conditions.

"Our problems later were terribly aggravated after 1970 by the state job freeze and, when we had 900 vacancies, the press came in," he added.

He unlocked a cabinet that contained his annual budget requests and pointed out sections in his summaries of years ago that dramatized the urgent need for additional funds and warned of misery for the children if the staff was not increased, substantially, and other help provided.

Hammond said he felt peculiar rereading those sections one day while listening to a television commentator's suggestions that his dedication to the status quo contributed to the school's problems.

He coupled references to his budget requests with a comment that his budget was increased from \$10 million in 1964 to \$34 million this year and that even that was not enough to substantially solve the school's mammoth problems.

Hammond pictured himself as trying to implement a discarded idea, trapped by the immense difficulty of implementing better alternatives.

"Thirty and forty years ago, large institutions were the thing," Hammond said, still leaning forward in his yellow swivel chair, still speaking softly and reflectively. "Now the emphasis is on foster homes, hostels, community services and return to the family and community."

"The state has tried to do this, but there are so many, many in the situation," he added.

"I guess Willowbrook was the most convenient target for all the publicity. The large, out-moded institution, the understaffing, the enormous problems . . ." His voice trailed.

Hammond said he maintained his superiors' fullest confidence but admitted he felt a scapegoat in the public's mind, where his performance was measured against unrealistic yardsticks.

He said he has always been, however, at peace with himself.

"I do not know how I could have acted differently," he said. "I did learn in the last months what activism could do, but it is not my way to be an activist."

"The media did what I couldn't do in awakening the public conscience," Hammond said. "If the objective of this activism is to be achieved, however, public pressure must

If the institution ultimately benefits from this attention, he has received," Hammond said. "I will be satisfied in the end that a lot of it was good to happen."

He said he looked forward to returning to Rome, which has 3,500 residents and a staff of 2,400, to a position about which he said he inquired last October.

He had chuckled earlier when he read a telegram from some employees at Rome that said, "Welcome home."

He seemed anxious to leave the public spotlight in which he never felt comfortable and in which he believed his character and labors were never perceived.

But his secretary entered to say a Rome newspaperman was on the telephone.

"It's starting already," he said, after a faint smile and a wistful pause.