

Willowbrook team to eye at-home care

By DAN DOLGIN

The Department of Health Education and Welfare has granted Willowbrook State School \$192,740 for a two-year project to "thoroughly evaluate each resident of the Willowbrook State School with the aim of returning to the community as many residents as possible."

The grant will help finance a program named Project Exodus. Most of the funds will be used for salaries of five specially trained professionals, who will screen and rehabilitate patients, according to Dr. Manny Sternlicht, director of

the adult rehabilitation services at Willowbrook and supervisor of the project.

Willowbrook applied for the money in early June.

Residents placed in homes or community centers will not be replaced, and Dr. Sternlicht indicated that Willowbrook might eventually reduce its case load from 5,200 patients to 1,200.

The five-man team will evaluate the patients in an order of priority, starting with those most capable of adjusting to normal community-based life, then those who could return to the community with the help of rehabilitation programs. Finally, severely and

profoundly retarded and physically handicapped will be evaluated.

The federally-funded panel will include a clinical physician, a psychiatric social worker, a clinical psychologist, a stenographer and an administrative coordinator.

The group will try to place patients back in their homes, with a subsidy to the family for health care.

Presently, Willowbrook charges the families of patients in proportion to their ability to pay.

If the family cannot take the patient back into the home, Project Exodus will attempt to

place him in a "family care" position. Family care entails an attempt to find homes for retarded children, with private families.

The state would attempt to provide funds and follow-up evaluation for former Willowbrook patients placed in private homes.

Presently, about 100 patients are placed.

If such units are not available, Dr. Sternlicht said, the team will try to find places for the patients "in group homes run in coordination with other established agencies."

Critics of Willowbrook care have recommended that community-controlled, small homes be founded to replace the over-sized Willowbrook. One physician employed at the school said Friday that "the state is emptying out Willowbrook, without having any place to put the patients."

"The Department of Mental Health has no programs at all that address themselves to rehabilitation or community services. They just have no money to put into the community," he added.

Since January, when numerous media organizations reviewed the problems at Willowbrook, many groups have recommended breaking up the large facility and settling patients in the community.

The Civil Liberties Union has filed a suit claiming that Willowbrook is too large to provide adequate health care.

Dr. Sternlicht acknowledged that the work on the application for project funds started after the massive press coverage of the crisis at Willowbrook this winter. But he added, the theories behind the plan pre-date the recent pressures from parent and community groups.