

The scene at Willowbrook

As protesters take office...

By PETER HARRIGAN

The acting director of Willowbrook State School yesterday gave in to the demands of a small group of demonstrators that he turn his office over to them as a token gesture and allow them to place a long-distance telephone call to Dr. Alan D. Miller, commissioner of the Mental Hygiene Department in Albany.

The action came during a peaceful, one and one-half hour protest in front of the institution's administration building, staged by about 40 members of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children.

The demonstrators, who were protesting the appointment of Dr. Miorag Ristic as acting director, without their being consulted, also maintained that conditions at Willowbrook, the state's largest institution for the mentally retarded, had not substantially changed since being publicized late last year.

'THE BEGINNING'

"This is really the beginning of a campaign to start taking affirmative action to enforce our own rights," said Murray Schneps, a vice president of the society.

He said that the demonstrators, most of whom have children at Willowbrook, were "appalled that Dr. Hammond was transferred and this other guy (Dr. Ristic) appointed without any word whatsoever."

Schneps said that earlier the society had written to Dr. Miller, requesting that parents of the institution's residents be given a role in the selection of Dr. Hammond's successor.

Although a reply was received from Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy commissioner of the department's division of mental retardation, assuring the parents that they would be consulted, Schneps charged the group knew nothing of Dr. Ristic's appointment.

"We have nothing negative to say about him, but we feel that we must be part of selecting a new director," Schneps said.

He also said that his group was angered by letters, which he termed "intimidating," sent to parents of Willowbrook residents by the Mental Hygiene Department, informing them of a move to transfer some of the patients out of the overcrowded institution and into smaller facilities elsewhere in the state.

Although the parents supposedly were given an option of approval or refusal of the transfer, Schneps contended that this was not made clear in the letter.

"What are they going to do with the children; what programs do they have for them?" in the other institutions?" he queried.

JOINS IN

State Assemblyman Andrew Stein, D-Manhattan, also joined in the protest, saying "The parents must be part of the decision-making process here at Willowbrook."

Stein, whose bill to radically alter the Mental Hygiene Department's structure was killed during the last legislative session, admitted, "We didn't have enough time during the session. Now that we have five

or six months (before the next session) we've really got to organize."

He said that his bill, which he plans to re-introduce, was modeled after a similar plan operating in California. It would create regional centers for the mentally retarded throughout the state and would also establish community-based facilities.

These would deal with a small number of patients, he said, thereby avoiding overcrowding which is the case at Willowbrook.

After about an hour of demonstration outside the administration building, Schneps, Anthony Pinto, president of the society, and about 10 other parents went into Dr. Ristic's office.

"We are asking you to turn this office over to us . . . to make a telephone call to Dr. Miller," Schneps told Dr. Ristic, who calmly stood near his desk throughout the encounter.

"My instructions are to be as conciliatory as possible," Dr. Ristic said, adding, "As far as I'm concerned, you can have the office and you can have the phone."

Pinto, who was unable to reach Dr. Miller, spoke instead to Dr. Grunberg and reported to the gathering in the office: "He said he'll convey the message to Dr. Miller."

Schneps and Dr. Ristic meanwhile discussed the role of the director of the institution, Schneps maintaining that "the director should have the right to criticize his superiors every day."

Dr. Ristic retorted, "It is my

understanding that a civil servant is not supposed to criticize his superiors. If you want to change the rules of the game . . ." he began to say, when he was interrupted by Schneps, who shouted; "Doctor, this is not a game. These are lives and children."

Later, several members of the group began shouting a series of complaints and demands at Dr. Ristic, but Schneps told them; "I think we've made our point here." The group quietly withdrew from the office.

Before leaving, Schneps told the doctor; "The next time we come back, it will not be a passived demonstration. We will take decisive action."

"We're going to be here and next time we're here Dr. Miller is going to be down (from Albany) in two hours," he said, although he declined to elaborate on the future plans of the group.