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Judge Criticizes Willowbrook, But Says He Can't Do Anything

By ROGER WETHERINGTON

A Family Court judge has blasted the "horrible, dreadful" conditions at Willowbrook State School and called on the state to move quickly to remedy them. But he "regretfully" ruled that he had no authority to intervene on behalf of any neglected children at the Staten Island institution.

In a decision made last week and served on the parties yesterday, the judge, Ralph J. Cory, dismissed a suit brought by the Staten Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. The society had asked him to act on behalf of neglected children at Willowbrook and order the City Welfare Department to contribute toward their support.

First Judicial Notice

Ira J. Raab, an attorney for the society, said he will file a notice of appeal, and called the decision a partial victory. He said it was the first judicial finding of neglect at Willowbrook.

Cory, assistant administrative judge of the Family Court for Staten Island, said state laws provide that a neglect charge can be brought against a parent or "other person legally responsible" for a child who does not provide the child with food, shelter, education or medical or surgical care.

But "not even by the most strained or liberal rules of construction" could the law be interpreted to include state institutions such as Willowbrook, he ruled.

Expresses His Feelings

But he said he could not help expressing his feelings about the "horrible conditions at Willowbrook," where the "most helpless and defenseless of our citizens" have often been consigned to "inadequate warehouses." Public apathy is now a renewed danger because the "gloryseekers" who exploited the problems for what he saw as publicity purposes "have long since fled the scene," he warned. He urged the Legislature not only to appropriate enough money for Willowbrook, but to authorize a state court to intervene.

The State Department of Mental Hygiene, which runs Willowbrook, "in effect is prosecutor,

judge and jury in its own domain," he charged.

Miodrag Ristic, acting director of Willowbrook, said no one denies that "deplorable conditions" exist at Willowbrook. But he said a program is in effect to eliminate such conditions within 20 months.

He said the federal courts do have jurisdiction over conditions at Willowbrook and that a similar suit is pending in Brooklyn Federal Court.

