

Willowbrook numbers less than 5,000

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — The population at Willowbrook State School for the mentally retarded, subject of controversy last year over patient treatment and conditions, has dropped below 5,000 for the first time in 14 years.

The State Mental Hygiene Department reported yesterday that the latest census shows a population of 4,977, a drop of 223 from the first of the year. The peak population at the Staten Island institution was 6,300 in 1963.

Willowbrook was criticized last fall for inadequate staffing and poor conditions for patients. Published and broadcast reports told of unattended patients wallowing in filth. There were stories of massive overcrowding and understaffing.

Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy commissioner, said that 51 deaths have occurred at the institution so far this year, a drop from 86 deaths in the same period last year.

"Although the declines in the resident population and in deaths indicate we are making progress," he said, "we still have a long way to go to reach the goals set for Willowbrook."

The institution also has hired 700 more employes, using money freed by the Legislature.

Grunberg said the reduction in population was achieved by closing admissions, placing qualified patients in the community, and transferring patients to other mentally retarded units and community-care facilities.

Hopefully, he said, the population will be reduced to 3,000 within the next two years.