

Plaintiffs tour Willowbrook score 'superficial' changes

By PETER HARRIGAN

Representatives of two legal groups that filed lawsuits in March against several state officials in connection with alleged maltreatment and neglect of patients at Willowbrook State School yesterday toured the facility with Dr. Miodrag Ristic, the acting director, and charged that the changes that have been made at the institution are "very superficial."

Before beginning the day-long inspection, which retraced the route of a similar tour late last year, the group had to overcome the objections of the state attorney general's office.

According to Robert Feldt of Staten Island's Legal Aid Society office, an agreement had been reached with Dr. Alan Miller, commissioner of the state Department of Mental Hygiene, stating that the institution could be toured provided 48-hours' notice was given.

Although Feldt and Bruce Ennis, an attorney from the New York Civil Liberties Union, which is co-sponsoring the class action suit, claimed to have provided such notice, they were told that they could not visit the building wards because state attorneys were not available to accompany them.

"As their attorneys we have a right to see them and visit them and inspect the conditions in which they live," Feldt said in reference to the institutions some 5,000 patients. Since the suit has been designated class action, all of Willowbrook's residents are being represented by the Legal Aid Society and the NYCLU.

Ristic said "We object to attorneys coming here when our attorneys are not available," but added, "I can't stop you if you're really determined" to make the inspection.

After a conference that lasted some 20 minutes in Ristic's office, the day-long tour began.

Included were visits to

Building Two, which serves as the institution's hospital, and Buildings Six, Seven, Nine and Ten.

The touring group, which included Dr. Mary Goodwin, a pediatrics expert serving as a witness for the plaintiffs in the suit, inspected a recently initiated behavior modification program. According to Feldt, the Liberal Party's candidate for the 60th Assembly District, the residents in the program "were all locked away like animals" until pressure, in the form of the suits, forced a change in treatment.

The principal changes in other buildings, such as recently painted walls, new furniture in ward day rooms, cleaner conditions throughout, and better food, were "super-

ficial," Feldt said. He pointed out that there is still a lack of "meaningful programs" for the patients, many of whom were sitting in chairs, staring at television programs.

Afterwards, Dr. Goodwin said that "really, very little has changed" since her previous

tour, and charged that the behavior modification program is really "a nothingness program."

The group planned to continue the fact-finding tour today, to gather more evidence of patient neglect and poor conditions to be used in the court case.

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE, Friday, September 15, 1972