

# Call Willowbrook crisis, says unit

By ELAINE BOIES

A request asking Gov. Rockefeller to declare Willowbrook State School in an actual state of emergency, and therefore eligible for immediate federal aid, was delivered yesterday to Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy state commissioner of mental hygiene, after he and other officials had toured the state institution.

The request was made by David Harris, president of the American Poor People's Youth Congress, at a news conference in the school's administration building.

A debate ensued, pitting Dr. Grunberg and Dr. Miodrag Ristic, the new acting director of Willowbrook, against representatives of the Youth Congress, parents of patients and employees.

During a tour of Building 14, one that houses severely retarded young children, the group had found a building that reflected care and cleanliness, and Dr. Grunberg commented wryly, "They'll think it was just done for their tour today."

Seeing a group of children wandering aimlessly in a large play pen, Dr. Grunberg asked an attendant why the children had no toys, nothing to play with. He was told there isn't enough help on Saturdays to supervise children playing with toys, and that they might accidentally hurt themselves.

"Could we try it? Let's try some toys," he said, urging the staff to provide more activity for the helpless children in the future.

In answer to a challenge raised by Harris at this point, as to why the children were not properly staffed. Dr.

Grunberg and Dr. Ristic spoke of the tremendous difficulties in getting qualified persons to work at Willowbrook.

Despite the fact that recent hirings have been at the rate of 52 new employes every two weeks, Dr. Ristic estimated that 35 resign after a short time.

Harry Eliazarian, deputy administrative director of the institution for the past seven weeks, said studies have shown that work with retardates is at the bottom of all scales in job preference.

Speaking of the Willowbrook resignations, he said, "Many, once they got into the work itself, found they couldn't take it."

Later, at the news conference, frustrated and angry parents, their energies nearly exhausted by years of complaining and petitioning to the administration, charged Dr. Grunberg and Dr. Ristic with falsifying medical records, dragging their heels on their promises to improve conditions at the school, and "a lack of good faith."

Grunberg emphatically denied any falsification of records, and described a program now underway to move as many residents as possible out into smaller community facilities. Already having a 300-bed unit in Manhattan, two units in Brooklyn, and a 750-bed facility in Fresh Creek, the department recently purchased a motel near Shea Stadium, Queens, to be used as another unit to relieve overcrowding at Willowbrook.

## "TRIAL AND ERROR"

"We're actively searching for two group homes on Staten Island," he said, and concluded, "to be very frank, I don't have all the answers. We're

operating in a very pragmatic way, through trial and error."

Earlier, the deputy commissioner had said Willowbrook's problems were "a result of many years of society's attitude that the mentally retarded are burdens of the state, and one of the things the expose has done is stir the state's conscience, so that we now have improved funds."

Ristic concurred. "We have enough funds now to pay all the staff we can hire. My job as director is to find talented people who will come," he added. "Everyone knows manpower resources at Willowbrook are woefully inadequate. We all agree this is a holding operation." The "holding operation" is pending the fulfillment of a two-year program designed to transfer nearly half of the residents to smaller units.

But the parents and Youth Congress members were unimpressed with the complexities of the job and unwilling to wait any longer for promised improvements.

Peter Siringano, a member of the Italian-American Civil Rights League and the father of a child in Building 12, said, "This is just like Attica, only it has a different name."

He "made a vow" to get two or three hundred men to throw a picket line around the institution. "Nobody will get in here. Then we'll have a real scandal, and then maybe something will be done," he said.

Harris also urged parents to mobilize, "to have an actual part in the raising of your child." He called for immediate solutions "with parents playing a major role."