

View

Willowbrook:

By ROGER WETHERINGTON

After Reform, What Then?

WILLOWBROOK State School, long and bitterly criticized as little more than a refugee camp for some of its retarded residents, is cautiously looking forward to a more hopeful future. After two decades of pressure from parents, a federal court suit and two major exposes in the press, the millions of dollars needed to end overcrowding are being supplied by the state to Willowbrook and 10 other state schools that serve similar functions.

But officials aren't kidding themselves.

When political circumstances change, they say, Willowbrook's darkest days could return, and probably will.

The Promising Plans

Dr. Frederic Grunberg, deputy state mental hygiene commissioner for retardation, said the plans call for reducing the Staten Island institution's population of 5,000 to 3,000 by March 31, 1974, the end of the state's next fiscal year. That would bring Willowbrook up to the federal standard for mental retardation facilities, he said.

Plans also call for some of the smaller, new state schools being established to admit 1,000 of Willowbrook's residents, while placing another 1,000 in foster care or other community facilities. The idea is to bring patients back to their own communities.

To provide the necessary facilities, quarters are being established on the grounds of some of the city's mental hospitals which are less heavily used these days because of treatment advances.

Dr. Miodrag Ristic, Willowbrook's new director, concedes that Willowbrook "can never be ideal" because of its "dehumanizing" size, even after the overcrowding ends. And the future of Willowbrook, he emphasizes, depends on how much can be done before there's another budget squeeze, such as the one that hit the institution two years ago.

"The question is not if, but when, the next budget crunch comes," he declared. "But perhaps we can get something done in the meantime."

Overcrowding, understaffing and financial binds are not Willowbrook's only problems. Its marginally paid employes are also a source of difficulties. While many are dedicated to the task of caring for the retarded, others are not. Some have been accused of neglect or abuse of their charges.

The current moves to end overcrowding are a result of the public furor created last January when the press began concentrating on the abuses at Willowbrook that followed the budget cut-back, Dr. Grunberg said.

For hours, retarded youngsters were left untended or were fed too quickly and inadequately by harassed, overworked employes, reporters learned. Willowbrook concentrated its dwindling resources on the brighter youngsters who had the best chance of profiting from attention and who required the least care. About 1,000 of them attended Willowbrook's school and a number of others also benefitted from productive programs. But even these services were cut.

Television pictures of Willowbrook's most severely retarded, multiply handicapped youngsters as they lay untended caused an outcry that spurred Gov. Rockefeller and the Legislature to provide the money needed to ease their plight.

Various moves to improve conditions, including a halt to admissions at Willowbrook and limited transfers of residents, were quickly announced. But the full program to end overcrowding was not announced in detail until July when Dr. Grunberg filed a statement in Brooklyn Federal Court.

He was replying to a suit that charged Willowbrook with violating the civil rights of its residents. Grunberg denied that court action forced him to move when he did. "These are very chronic, very old problems," he said.

Budget Cuts Blamed

"We could not have developed such a sophisticated plan in response to that suit," he added. "We had been working on it for many years," he said, but the program was thrown back by the budget cuts.

Mental hygiene officials spoke out as sharply as possible against the cuts before the Legislature made them, he asserted. Willowbrook had already been improved from a decade ago when its population had hit a peak of 6,300. The staff had already been increased following the last series of scandals, which broke out in the late 1960s when then Sen. Robert Kennedy (D-N.Y.) pointed to some of Willowbrook's failings.

"We went on record as to what the implications of the cutbacks would be," Grunberg said, and mental hygiene officials were "castigated" by the Legislature for daring to do so. "People can set the priorities in a democracy," he noted.

"The Legislature has the responsibility, and we have to respect their wishes." The mental hygiene officials thought of