

# State nudges Willowbrook split

By KENNETH R. FANIZZI

Willowbrook, once called "the last outrage" and "the big town's leper colony," is on the way out.

The state is shifting away from the massive, impersonal institutions and their condemning custodial care, replacing them instead with smaller centers with a heavy thrust on community care.

While the State Department of Mental Hygiene has nothing on paper, the shift toward a

smaller unit, perhaps 300 residents, appears planned for Staten Island.

Dr. Miodrag Ristic, Willowbrook's young director, made this observation and others concerning the world's largest school for the retarded.

"The avowed goal is to phase out Willowbrook in 10 to 15 years," Dr. Ristic said.

The aim is to take the heat off Willowbrook and set up smaller schools in other boroughs and nearby counties to ease critical wall-to-wall

conditions at Willowbrook.

A state advisory council reported yesterday that despite public pressure to improve conditions at Willowbrook State School the facility for the retarded is simply too large, too crowded and poorly located to serve its purpose.

The state Developmental Disabilities Advisory Council recommended that Willowbrook should be reorganized, and that its patients should be moved to new facilities located in each of the five boroughs.

The 35-member council had been asked by Gov. Rockefeller last March to investigate conditions at the facility after conditions there drew severe criticism.

The school, which previously had a population of 6,300 patients, serves primarily the mentally retarded from the New York City area.

The council noted in its report to the governor that its recommendation to establish smaller units in each of the five boroughs would permit patients

to live near their homes, and would encourage parents' participation in the hospitals' programs.

The council recommended that Willowbrook be maintained as a facility to serve residents of Staten Island.

Ground has been broken for such a smaller facility in the Bronx. One opened in Brooklyn three months ago.

What will happen to the sprawling 368-acre Willowbrook compound with its 50 buildings? Ristic couldn't say.

But Dr. Ristic did comment openly on what's going on in Willowbrook today: The boggling size of the place, fiscal woes, staff problems and most importantly the care of its 4,490 patients.

The most able — the mildly retarded — are moving out at an average rate of 20 a week, Ristic reported.

Many are on out-patient status or in day-care programs. Others are placed in hostels (run by volunteer agencies with

state help) or family care programs where families get financial aid and provide needed love, guidance and moderate supervision. Admissions are closed while the exodus goes on.

By March of next year, Dr. Ristic hopes to have only 3,200 patients — a far cry from the 6,300 that were once housed there. He's not expecting too much now. The breakthrough, he feels, will come at the 3,000-resident level when he hopes to "put some order into the operation."

In the meantime, he'll concentrate on providing patients with a "decent life" and "real chance" at being rehabilitated "to their fullest."

Depending on the severity of the brain damage, rehabilitation for some can at best be a borderline for normality.

There's no privacy at Willowbrook. Thirty to 40 people sit around in a hall. There are

150 in a ward. Ristic wants to knock this down to 78. He says it'll be "inexpensive" to remodel the wards and give them a "homey atmosphere."

He has split the awesome housing structure into 10 units, with more supervisory and ward personnel. In the past, one person was responsible for as many as 13 buildings. That's been chopped to two and Dr. Ristic feels some headway is being made.

(Patients had been strapped in a statewide hiring freeze which has been lifted. Building