

# 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

directors just held the line to prevent catastrophes.)

Dr. Ristic still faces the problem of high employe absenteeism.

He's perplexed by the heavy turnover in ward attendants. Recently, 300 more were hired. Now, only half remain. There are still 100 vacancies on the floors.

The 34-year-old Yugoslavian psychiatrist admits the pay for such work is below par, but says adamantly: "Willowbrook is not a haven for social misfits" He stands firm on accountability.

Thirteen employes were dismissed last month, mostly for failing to show up for work.

Previously, ward attendants were faced with an impossible task. They couldn't handle the sheer numbers, so most sat in corners and did nothing. Since then, 175 housekeepers also have been hired to relieve the strain and give attendants more time to spend with patients.

Dr. Ristic feels he can't tolerate one bad apple. "It casts aspersions on all of us," he said.

Asked if morale has improved, Ristic offered a cautious yes, adding, "only in certain places."

On the medical side, the institution struggles along with only 28 doctors, or one to every 170 residents. Dr. Ristic said he could use 70.

The state pays its doctors \$25,000 to start.

Ristic says he has dismissed doctors at Willowbrook, but shaking his head he quickly adds: "There are times it's better to have some, than none at all."

To lessen the burden on the medical staff, he's advertised for qualified part-time physicians. The director says he's gotten some excellent prospects.

Dr. Ristic is a bug on records. "Let's make decisions in the open and record them," he declared. "At least we'll know what we're doing . . ." or what has to be done in patient care.

The director has issued a firm directive on the need for patient profiles. He encourages staff conferences with family members. If the family is dissatisfied, and feels our

treatment isn't "ambitious enough," he continued, "that's fine."

"We'll follow through," Dr. Ristic said, although he admitted "some (patients) may not be able to handle more arbitrary goals than just keeping them alive."

The school has been under investigation for several months, following disclosures of death, filth and lack of even minimal custodial care.

Referring to one court case, Ristic said records was the "one thing they hit us on." There were records, he said, but not "the meaningful" kind.

Gov. Rockefeller has proposed that \$5 million more be funneled into Willowbrook. Its annual budget now runs more than \$30 million, or about \$7,000 average cost per patient.

"God!" Ristic declared. "A place like this can never be good," so it forces the state to offer alternatives.

While the trend is away from places like Willowbrook to treat the retarded, there's still the problem of breaking down psychological barriers — a trend that's not finding its way out of society's closet easily.

There are those who still consider the mentally retarded as outcasts, Ristic said.

Even many parents of the mentally retarded have forgotten them.

Across the country, the status of America's care for its millions of mentally retarded citizens is coming under a social crossfire unparalleled in the history of state and local institutions.

#### CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE

And Willowbrook is one of those caught in the crossfire.

Some excerpts from the advisory council's report include:

"Modern concepts for services for the retarded, including residential facilities, require that such facilities be relatively small and located in the community so that the residents can become part of community life.

"The facility had 5,000 residents (at the time the council visited it) in space which should only serve 2,970 residents. The real impact of this 66 per cent overcrowding figure was observed in the ward sleeping areas, where the beds were often literally inches apart.

"With the major emphasis on the medical problems, all of the other professional disciplines compete with each other for attention and resources in order to survive, with little energy for any cooperative effort on behalf

of the residents.

"The traditional state school organization is characterized by the following: The director is a physician, with a hierarchy of physicians under him, and a hierarchy of nurses under them.

"The allegiance to authority lines results in a very tight perpendicular organization structure, rather than a flexible one."

The council said the Department of Mental Hygiene had developed a plan to reduce overcrowding at Willowbrook, and the council monitored the department's progress in implementing the plan as part of the council's study.

The first step of the department's plan was the closing of all admissions to Willowbrook, which would reduce the population of the hospital to 2,970 by March 1974.

The council reported that the department claims that its progress has been hampered by parents refusing to allow their children to be removed from Willowbrook.

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