

State backs Willowbrook critics

First goal is to ease patient jam

By DAVID O. STEWART
Advance Staff Writer

ALBANY—The state Mental Hygiene Department is "largely in agreement" with the sharply critical findings of a state investigation of Willowbrook School which were issued earlier this week, a state official said yesterday.

The report, issued by the State Advisory Council on Developmental Disabilities, called the Willowbrook facility "overcrowded, too large, poorly located and ineffectively administered."

"We agree with most of what the report said," Robert W. Hayes, associate commissioner of mental hygiene, said yesterday.

"We're trying to do as much as we can to improve the situation," Hayes said. "Right now, our first goal is to get the size of the place down."

The basic recommendation of the state report was that Willowbrook be largely disbanded in favor of smaller institutions in each of the city's boroughs.

Hayes said the state's goal now is "to base in Willowbrook only those programs necessary to complement local programs in Richmond. We have to try to achieve a situation where the size of Willowbrook is in scale

with the size of the home community."

The state has announced a program of cutting back the population of Willowbrook from 4,500 to 2,970 in March 1974, but the report claimed that even with these reductions, "it will still be too large by modern program concepts for residential facilities for the retarded."

At one time the population at Willowbrook was more than 6,000.

Hayes said yesterday that his department agrees with this position, but he admitted that it has been unable to meet target goals for reducing the population at the state school.

"We will fall about 200 short of getting down to 4,200 by this month," he said, attributing much of the trouble to parental resistance to having their children transferred.

"The parents' position is very understandable, since Willowbrook becomes like a home to them, and they are uncomfortable leaving," he said. The report recommended that if parental opposition could not be overcome, the patients should be transferred regardless of such opposition.

The reduction in population is seen as a general remedy for many of the problems at Willowbrook, since it will lighten the load on the Willowbrook staff and facilities.

NO PROGRAMS

The harshest criticism in the 54-page document was directed at the lack of habilitation programs for the residents. Existing efforts to increase the abilities of the residents were called below acceptable standards, and in some cases "grossly inadequate."

"Few residents appeared to be receiving services which would just keep them from deteriorating further, much less programs which would increase their level of function," the report said.

"Apparently there was no objective evaluation record for each resident which was kept current as a basis for an effective positive plan of action for each individual," it was further observed.

The state council noted that the school is presently undertaking a "systematic reevaluation" of each patient, but expressed concern that "the program may stretch out over two or more years, leaving many residents without a comprehensive plan of services to meet their needs during this period."

Hayes said that presently there is one team of specialists from New York Medical College and Albert Einstein College of Medicine working out the reevaluation project. He expressed confidence that "at least" one other reevaluation team could be formed in the near future, in order to speed up the project.

The state report also pointed out that the training programs for Willowbrook staff are inadequate, contributing to the "aura of hopelessness" of the school.

POOR TRAINING

"Very little is in the training which would give the new employe any idea that the residents were not doomed to stay as they are, but could function at a higher level with effective services," the report said.

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