

State council documents failure of Willowbrook

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ALBANY — "In the visits to Willowbrook and in the examination of the testimony presented at the previous State and Federal hearings, the members were dismayed to find that many of the conditions previously reported were not exaggerated . . .

"The council found Willowbrook to be overcrowded, too large, poorly located, and ineffectively administered."

The report of the New York State Advisory Council on Developmental Disabilities on Willowbrook, which was released last week, found conditions at the state facility for the mentally retarded so bad that only one solution appeared: Dismantle the school.

The report pushed the concept of "unitization," which would establish smaller facilities for the mentally retarded in each county, where the residents would be closer to their families and where interaction with the community could be greater.

But, as was clear in the report, the major reason for the council's insistence on "utilization" is that Willowbrook was a bad idea from the start.

The 54-page document explained in its opening pages that the size of Willowbrook, which cut it off from the community and which complicated the already immense problems of working with the retarded, is "an embarrassing symbol of society's attitude toward the mentally retarded."

"Society wanted the retarded to be cared for in remote

facilities where they would not harm or embarrass the public or affect the public conscience," the report stated.

"Since little was to be done for the retarded beyond custodial care, economy encouraged the development of large facilities for the retarded to increase efficiency."

According to the report, Willowbrook was outdated when it opened in 1948.

"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 a part of community life," the council said.

The report criticized Willowbrook for being too large, too removed from the community, and too remote for the parents of the residents to take an active part in the care of their children.

Hopelessly worsening this situation, according to the report, was the fact that Willowbrook was "grossly overcrowded" and still is.

"The facility had 5,000 residents in space which should only serve 2,970 residents," the report said. Right now, there are 4,500 residents, and by March of next year the Department of Mental Hygiene hopes to be down to the 2,970 figure.

In order to reduce the population, residents are being transferred to other, smaller facilities.

The report claimed that the overcrowding was so bad that it was a violation of the New York State Hospital Code for Health Related Facilities.

The code required 80 square feet of sleeping area for each resident, while Willowbrook averaged only 47.5 square feet. The report called this situation both unhealthful and undesirable because it destroys the patient's privacy and personal comfort.

A corollary impact of the overcrowding was overuse of sanitary facilities, the report said.

"The department's standards for each facility require one toilet and lavatory and one shower or bathtub for every four residents. Most of the wards at Willowbrook had one toilet for every ten residents — if all eight toilets were working — with one shower stall for every 40 residents."

The overcrowding also led to depressing conditions which caused high staff turnover and excessive absenteeism.

According to the report although the staff-patient ratio on paper was one staff member for every 2.1 residents, in effect there was only one ward worker for every 14 residents.

Also, about 40 per cent of the professional positions on the Willowbrook staff were vacant. These vacancies were due to the facility's isolation, the depressing nature of the work, and the overcrowding, the report said.

The "drab and colorless" physical environment was also criticized by the report for "adding to the environmental woes of the resident."

"The ward areas were designed with the expectation that the retardate will act in a primitive and uncontrolled manner," the report stated, and there is little in the physical environment "that could be considered as contributing to the normalization of the resident."

TRAINED STAFF NEEDED

The report devoted much space to the need for more highly trained staff in order to improve the situation in Willowbrook.

"The council found that most of the wards at Willowbrook did not have enough trained staff to maintain even a minimum standard of custodial care, much less to provide any rehabilitation program," it said.

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The Administration at Willowbrook received some of the most pointed criticism in the report, which scored the dominance of the medical profession in the facility.

"Hospital routines prevail, and non-medical as well as medical decisions are made only by doctors. With the major emphasis on medical problems, all of the other professional disciplines compete with each

other for attention and resources in order to survive, with little money left for any cooperative effort on behalf of the residents."

The report also claimed that the administration was fragmented, and "departments were found to be somewhat self-serving with survival overshadowing the objective of quality service to the residents."

But the final message of the report is clear: "Willowbrook as it now stands should be dissolved."

Willowbrook is a problem which the state has decided cannot be solved on its own terms. With this report, the state is committing itself to smaller, community-oriented treatment facilities for the retarded.

Willowbrook, according to the report, should be used to "serve only Richmond."

The report does not promise dramatic improvement in the lives of the mentally retarded. In fact, it says that the most permanent contribution to be made in the field is to reduce the occurrence of mental retardation.

But the report insists that the public is largely responsible for aiding the retarded.

"A large responsibility remains for the public who must provide not just sympathy, but active support for the changes at Willowbrook and at all institutions for the retarded," the report said.

"Apathy must not allow the creation of any more Willowbrooks."

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