

PHS Hospital eyed for Willowbrook's ill

By KENNETH R. FANIZZI

Willowbrook State School is negotiating with the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton to care for its acutely ill patients, it was disclosed yesterday.

Dr. Miodrag Ristic, Willowbrook's director, commenting on Tuesday's federal court order directing the state to enter into a contract with an accredited hospital for such care, said "we've been moving in certain areas."

The young psychiatrist said such a deal needs approval from Albany and Washington.

Although the federal hospital is under pressure to close, Ristic said he couldn't turn to Staten Island's other hospitals for relief because of the severe shortage of hospital beds.

If the PHS facility does close, he continued, the state institution would have to look elsewhere, "off the Island." It would be a nuisance, but there would be no other choice, Ristic added.

Dr. Ristic indicated he'd prefer to send his residents to a hospital "that knows our problem."

In ordering that outside hospital services be contracted, the court ruled that the school's hospital fails to meet the standards of required medical care.

U.S. District Court Judge Orrin Judd directed Willowbrook to hire more doctors, nurses and other personnel and ordered the state to remedy "inhumane and shocking" conditions there and make necessary repairs.

The judge listed nine specific steps to correct the institution's inadequacies. Ristic labeled these "desirable goals," noting that he and his staff have been attempting to clear up some of the shortcomings.

The 34-year-old Yugoslavia-born director said Judge Judd "approached his task very conscientiously," emphasizing that the decision "is not humiliating to us. He went to great pains to do what he thought was fair. . ."

Dr. Ristic said some significant steps have been taken for Willowbrook's improvement, adding "things are sort of moving."

He spoke about the daily shifting of patients, calling the 900 reduction in population the past year "pretty good." The institution now houses about 4,500 residents.

Dr. Ristic reported 17 part-time physicians have been hired, serving mostly at night and on weekends, to relieve the hard-pressed medical staff.

Referring to the court order to hire more ward attendants to bring the ratio of patients to staff down nine to one, Dr. Ristic said he's studying a plan to increase the staff and authorize more overtime.

To meet the court order, Dr. Ristic said, Willowbrook would need 2,000 attendants. He said there are about 1,900 on the payroll, although the institution is plagued by 15 per cent employe absenteeism and "excessive" sick leaves.

He reported employe attendance has improved and is now "more stable."

He attributed this possibly to the warmer weather or a tougher stand taken by management to curb the problem.

ABSENTEEISM

The state had argued that attempts to increase the staff were thwarted by chronic absenteeism, but Judd said he could not "accept such a confession of administrative failure."

Eventually, Dr. Ristic said, he would like to have 45 residents to a ward and 20 attendants. He viewed this as a "workable situation."

The state's long-range plan is to phase out Willowbrook and set up five smaller, independently administered units, one in each borough. The institution's residency is expected to be cut to 2,500 by 1975.

A formal trial is expected to be held next fall on major and long-range institutional reforms demanded by the plaintiffs, parents of residents and the State Association for Retarded Children.

Judge Judd had ruled that patients at the world's largest institution for the mentally retarded had a constitutional right to protection "from harm."

He also told state officials to make periodic reports on the remedies ordered.