

# Willowbrook

# Money for custody, not for habilitation

By JOAN MOTYKA

While the "Last Great Excuse" for not providing adequate care and services has traditionally been lack of dollars, Willowbrook State School can't use it.

The money is there.

Yet even as Willowbrook administrators use virtually a free hand in money matters, the "Last Great Disgrace" is there, too.

According to Willowbrook director, Miodrag Ristich, all efforts at the institution are now being directed at complying with the recent federal court order.

Ristich's interpretation of the order is that Willowbrook must provide "safekeeping" of

the residents, and so the emphasis is on custodial care rather than habilitation.

"We find ourselves having to strain resources to have the bare minimum for safe custody," Ristich said. "The court order doesn't mandate habilitative services. The most pressing thing now is to give decent custodial care."

He added, "With all the money in the world we couldn't do much in the next two months to provide habilitation."

The order demands that Willowbrook administrators and the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene increase the number of ward attendants, nurses, physical therapists,

physicians and recreation staffers.

Under the order, Willowbrook must also prohibit seclusion of residents, approve a contract with an accredited hospital to care for Willowbrook's acutely ill and repair all toilets.

Yet the order, according to Ristich, has set priorities that Willowbrook must conform to immediately. Because of this, other programs, hiring and expectations have been set aside.

"Our priorities are being set for us," Ristich said. "First things come first. There's more preoccupation with making sure the undesirable things don't happen than to make positive

things happen."

Ristich's defensiveness about Willowbrook is mixed with overriding optimism.

"We've accomplished quite a bit," he says. He is proud that conditions are no longer as bad as they were last year when Willowbrook attracted national publicity.

Claiming that conditions are improved because of increased hiring, a decline in staff absenteeism and a decrease of the resident population by 1,000, he adds, "All of this was accomplished without exorbitant expenses."

"We overspent only a little, but we still stayed within the budget," he says. "We could have spent more money had we been able to hire more staff members, like physical therapists. But you can't just take them off a shelf."

"To my knowledge, we're producing as much as we can with what we've got. To do more we would need more staff members and fewer residents."

Willowbrook's defensive efforts in complying with the court order come during a transition stage in the institution's history.

While Willowbrook increase its staff size, it also attempts to keep pace with trends and thereby retardation by returning residents to the community and thereby reducing its population.

In keeping with the belief that large institutions are dehumanizing and deny adequate care, the current thinking in the field of mental retardation is that the retarded can rise to a higher level of functioning if they receive individualized rather than institutionalized care.

The major thrust is towards habilitation.

Yet at Willowbrook, administrators see the court order as demanding "safekeeping." Willowbrook has traditionally been a custodial care institution and the intense criticism it received last year exposed its ineffectiveness in even providing minimal custodial care.

What reforms did follow reflected the photographed faces of the children who stared up from urine-sticky floors, or the old men who laid in half-naked bundles in the corners, or the young women who have learned to live with the stench and rock, to and fro, wordless.

Willowbrook critics claim that still not enough has been done and have taken their barrage of complaints to court.

It is ironic that the courts have stepped in to remedy a problem they are partially responsible for. Willowbrook admissions have, for years, been processed through the courts. Critics claim that judges subjected their cases to Willowbrook without even being aware of the conditions.

The court order mandates that additional employees be hired and conditions improved. The necessary money for these changes does not present any problem to Ristich.

"The money's got to come from somewhere. Something's got to give, and that's part of the order," he said.

However, he noted that there's "hardly ever in the state a pot of money sitting idle."

He claimed that the level of service any agency can provide is dependent on the budget which is in turn dependent on popular support.

"Politicians must comply with the public's demands," he said.

In commenting on a statement by special education expert, Dr. Burton Blatt, that Willowbrook is everyone's fault, he claimed that rather than being everyone's fault, it was everyone's irresponsibility.

"People who don't support adequate levels of services are gambling. It can happen to them, to their children," he said. "People have to make provisions for calamity."

Links on the financial chain begin with the public which makes its demands known to the legislature. The legislature then allocates money to various agencies and the budget that

is approved must be divided within state agencies for a variety of programs.

The New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, which Willowbrook operates under, has jurisdiction over all state mental retardation facilities and programs. The budget it works with must be divided in order that the best possible service be provided.

Ristich is not fighting to get a bigger piece of the budgetary pie if other facilities that might be able to help Willowbrook could get more heavily funded.

"I'd rather see the money going to other facilities so that we could move residents, so they could relieve us," he said.

Willowbrook's Exodus program transfers Willowbrook residents to other state facilities where they will be helped to make the next step into the community.

More than 600 Willowbrook

residents so far have been moved to other state facilities, but according to Al Robidoux, chief of the Community Services Unit at Willowbrook, there is now a slowdown in transfers since the other facilities are rapidly filling.

While Willowbrook, like all other state institutions, may theoretically be caught between budgetary horns, it now nonetheless has money to work with.