

Home program offers hope for hundreds at Willowbrook

By JOAN MOTYKA

"Oh, I miss him so much. It would be my heart's desire, not only mine alone, but my whole family, to have our little boy home with us again.

"Everyone in the family loves him and would do anything for him. Our friends, our minister, all who he comes in contact with, love him.

"Oh, Mr. Berman, would you please consider me worthy of the right of having him? I do believe that he will live longer, and I feel so sorry for him because nobody has ever come to ask about him, and he knows no other relatives except us.

"I am pleading with you, Mr. Berman, as my superior advisor, asking you to please let me have him in my care and God will bless you."

Twenty-two years ago, a deeply religious Brooklyn woman pleaded with Willowbrook State School's director to let her keep her 8-year-old foster son.

In the winter of 1942, the boy had been found in his room, almost frozen to death. When his mother deserted the family in 1944, his father placed him with the Children's Aid Society, which placed him with a foster family.

"He was given to me to take care of on 8-2-44," the foster mother wrote in her letter to the director. "At that time, he was in awful condition. He could not even sit down in a chair. I nursed that little boy from then on, and I had worrisome days and sleepless nights, but with it all, I never gave up."

When the boy was 8 years old, the Children's Aid Society recommended him for Willowbrook care. Under protests from the foster mother and the family's minister, the child was admitted to Willowbrook.

HISTORY

In 1952, his IQ was 59. When he was in foster care, he did not progress in school, but reportedly seemed to be doing well in the home.

In 1966, after being institutionalized for 15 years, his IQ was down to 43. He regressed from being considered educable to only trainable, and became a belligerent young man.

While he was institutionalized, his foster mother died. He had no correspondents or visitors and often fantasized about family life.

Today, he is still in Willowbrook. He is 29 years old, a man who had once known love in a foster family, a man today who has 22 years of institutionalized life behind him.

He is one of many in Willowbrook, placed there years ago and seemingly forgotten. The years in the institution had taken their toll on him.

Yet for him, and many others like him, there is hope emerging out of the long years behind the institution's walls.

The Federal Grant Evaluation Team is currently reviewing all Willowbrook residents and making recommendations for their future care.

"Very few people, if any, belong in institutions," Dr. Norman Ruttner, a physician on the team, claimed. "We're trying to get them out. A great majority of the people now here would thrive better in homes."

The team is composed of a physician, two psychologists, two social workers, a coordinator and a stenographer. To date, 311 residents have been evaluated with 891 recommendations made for them. Of that group, 17 per cent have already left Willowbrook.

In evaluating, the team considers each resident as a special individual and considers all the unique psychological, medical, social and familial characteristics of each person.

They probe old charts and records, interview the resident and medically examine him.

With the information they gather, recommendations are made, whether they are practical or not. If programs are needed for the resident and are non-existent, the team suggests them, hoping their recommendations

will be needed for the benefit of the resident.

As the team progresses in their evaluations, they find people who originally should not have been placed in Willowbrook, people who were medically and

psychologically ignored, people who did not have continuity in medical treatment or people who were placed for personal or familial reasons.

A blind child with a 90 IQ, "who acted retarded because of other handicaps," is one misdiagnosed case, Dr. Ruttner said. The young man in his mid-20s who did not do as well as was expected in a Hebrew school, was another. Dr. Ruttner also speaks of many young girls placed in Willowbrook because their parents thought they would become promiscuous or would be sexually assaulted elsewhere.

The border-line retardates who were placed in Willowbrook and would have thrived better in home situations, constitute a large group the team is hoping to have released.

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY

"New York State, by its policy of institutionalization, has in a way encouraged parents to abdicate their responsibility," Dr. Ruttner claims. "For years, doctors, parents and administrators, too, in their attitudes encouraged institutionalization.

"There are a myriad of kids here who don't belong here," he said.

Yet as the team works to release people from Willowbrook one of the greatest problems faced is the effect of long-term institutionalization on the residents.

"The person has been institutionalized so long that he can't be released now," is a statement Dr. Ruttner found in response to a team recommendation that one resident be released.

"It's a Catch 22," he says. "A lot of the residents have been institutionalized so long that

they don't have the social amenities; they don't know how to dress or behave."

There is also "static" that the team receives from Willowbrook building personnel.

"They've been working here long enough to believe that people really belong in institutions," Ruttner claims.

The effects of long-term institutionalization also are exacerbated by medical problems that Dr. Ruttner, as physician of the team, is finding.

"Fifty-eight per cent of the residents examined need further medical consultation. We're finding problems that hadn't been picked up before," he claims.

"A lot have been minor, but too many have been significant: Orthopedic deformities, eye pathology, significant heart disease."

The major limitation of the team is that it is an agency which only recommends without powers of implementation. That must be left with building personnel, staff physicians, the Community Services Unit, and finally, the administration.

The team is, however, Dr. Ruttner says, "One of the efforts to make Willowbrook better."

"After the residents have been evaluated, many of them come back every few days to ask when they're getting out. You bump into them outside and they ask.

"Most of them express a desire to get out."

(Fourth in a series)