

Willowbrook work center to provide therapeutic jobs

By GRETA FIELDS

A work center has been started with a small group of handicapped persons at Willowbrook State School which the founding psychologist believes can be expanded to include more than one-fourth of the residents at the institution.

The goal of the new Willowbrook Work Activity Center is to provide useful and therapeutic work to a large body of handicapped people working in a sheltered work environment inside Willowbrook. Some of the persons can also be trained for outside employment, however.

At present, the center employs 62 persons who have turned out one and one-half million pieces of work and earned \$2,500, according to Richard Simon, a psychologist who started the center in September with the aid of William Rose, an occupational therapist.

The center could be expanded to include 1,100 of the institution's 4,000 severely retarded residents, according to Simon, but there are several problems.

Simon said there is an immediate need for a truck to deliver work to and from outside businesses. At present, they depend on volunteer

truckers. "Sometimes their vehicles are already committed and that leaves us in a terrible predicament," he said.

The other main problem is getting enough outside work for a large body of workers. The type work needed is "large quantities of repetitive work," Simon said. Examples are assembly, sorting, labeling, packaging, envelope insertions and sealing and folding paper.

The workers have completed contracts assembling ballpoint pens for a Manhattan firm and sorting buttons for a Carlstad, N.J., firm.

The advantage of using retarded workers for such work is that they are "perfectly willing" and have a "great deal of stamina" for it, Simon said. Since their work is slower than the average worker, they are paid somewhat lower also.

"It's not a question of earning money, because most of these individuals do not really know the value of money," Simon said. It is a question of the fulfillment of doing something active, finding out they are capable of accomplishing something worthwhile. They're made to feel good."

Some enjoy it so much they

don't want to leave at the end of the day, he said.

Under the present program, the group is employed three hours a day for five days a week. But there is ample space and a pool of professional help at Willowbrook to enlarge the program providing the other problems can be solved. The problem is finding a truck and driver was reported to the volunteer services office at Willowbrook, but there appears to be no easy solution, the psychologist said.