

Willowbrook magazine underscores problems

By NED HOUSEMAN

Hostility between lower echelon workers and administrators at the Willowbrook Developmental Center found expression in an underground magazine distributed at the center.

Written by employes, ex-employes and volunteers of the state institution, the magazine entitled, "The Aide to Willowbrook," is a collection of essays, poems and letters largely critical of the administration. It charges that aides are untrained, unsupervised, unaware of therapeutic programs and unable to obtain necessary supplies and equipment.

"It's mainly a political thing," said Charlie Olson, an editor who was fired from his job at Willowbrook in June. He described the publication as "an open forum to expose all the good and bad problems throughout the field of mental retardation, especially at Willowbrook."

Olson and several others distributed about 1,300 copies of the journal. Later, Olson and a co-editor, Larry Newman, were summoned to the office of Donald Flemming, deputy director, who ordered them to restrict their activities to three buildings. They later defied him and handed out the rest of the copies.

A theme that emerges clearly in the magazine is the anger and frustration felt by some Willowbrook employes. In an article entitled, "On Willowbrook," Timothy Casey offers a possible explanation:

"Willowbrook employes appear to be divided into two

classes: An upper class, predominantly white, college educated and well paid doctors, team leaders, unit chiefs, psychologists, and social workers), and a lower class, predominantly, non college educated, and poorly paid (attendants, housekeepers).

"The member of both classes overwhelmingly agree that Willowbrook is not a nice place to live and that much more

training — and the aides aren't kept in one place long enough to have the equipment to do it. And ordering takes a year or so just to get a TV repaired or a radio."

"I couldn't and can't do my job. I have become complacent. I've had to," the supervisor is quoted as saying.

The magazine is no less critical of the aides themselves, who are described in one passage as "alcoholics, party-people, drug-users, sadists."

"The uneducated and low-educated aides don't know any better way other than their own upbringing about handling children," states one article. "So no matter how dedicated and sincere any of these aides are, they are going to make a great deal of mistakes without proper training."

The publication drew a sympathetic response from one aide who was supervising some male residents outside. The residents, unshaven and in various states of undress, sat on benches and played in the dirt. Some tried to eat the dirt. Most didn't do anything.

"No one likes to work on a job eight hours a day doing nothing — and then being harassed because nothing's being done because they don't give you anything to do with," he said. "People come

in here well intentioned and then in two weeks or a month they don't want to do anything. It tears them right down."

That point of view was countered yesterday by Dr. Eric Sheldon, program director. Noting that "boredom is the killer," he claimed that "since the staff sees itself as lacking equipment, they don't use the equipment that they have."

"And at that point the most horrible of human emotions comes into play — apathy," he said.

Dr. Sheldon noted that there were a number of working programs at Willowbrook, including a "way-out" program designed to teach residents to perform those functions necessary to live on the outside. He claimed that more than 20 residents had been released to the community after participating in it.

Olson yesterday conceded that the "way-out" program was "fantastic" and that there were a number of good workshops. He charged, however, that "nobody else on the whole ground knows they exist."

"There is a vast lack of communication. Certain buildings have workshops and other buildings don't know of their existence. Some buildings have psychologists, and the aides don't even know what they look like," he said.

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could and should be done for the human beings that live there. Here though, agreement ends. Those in the upper class confide conditions would be better if we had more interested, dedicated attendants, housekeepers ... those in the lower class believe that things would improve if we had more competent, industrious team leaders, unit chiefs."

In a more strident article entitled, "Blowing Off Steam," an anonymous employe blasts "so-called professionals" who are allegedly afraid to "dirty their hands" by working with severely retarded residents. He charges that well-furnished therapy rooms go unused, that needed programs are not established and that supplies are not available.

"The residents don't even have their own combs, brushes, deodorants, etc. Does anyone really realize the hassle one must go through to obtain these articles?" the anonymous critic asks.

Team leaders and unit chiefs — those who supervise the aides — are described by the editors as "frightened for their jobs, money and security." One unit leader is quoted as saying, "I couldn't get mad at them for not knowing what to do on the wards because they hadn't the