

Willowbrook Is Getting Better— Slowly



Instructors work with children on mat and trampolines in recreation room. News photo by Jim Romano

By MARY ENGELS

"Willowbrook is like a city. It has its good buildings and its bad buildings." That was the assessment of Howard Hellman, unit chief of Building 18 at the Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island.

He was speaking nearly three years after Willowbrook's "bad buildings"—characterized by too many residents, too few staffers and too little effort to provide good programs—had landed the school for the retarded in a major scandal. Today, after budget funds were added, there is more staff and much less overcrowding.

'Way Out Program'

Hellman said he works for one of the "good buildings" at the center. His building features a "Way Out Program" for the residents.

The program, which was introduced a year ago by Dr. Eric Sheldon, chief of Willowbrook's Rehabilitation Services, is designed to teach residents how to adapt to a home like atmosphere and learn to live in a community either in their own homes or a group-home environment.

Since the program started, about 20 residents have been moved out of Willowbrook and into communities.

Sheldon confessed to having trouble getting the program started.

"When we began," he said, "we were confronted with smashed equipment, not once but twice. We knew it was the staff," he said. "They'd reasoned that if we could teach 36 residents how to make it out of here, then there would no longer be any need for the employees to stay either and a loss of jobs would result."

Feed Motivation by Fear

"Fear motivated them, so we had to show them there was nothing to fear," he said.

Sheldon said the whole picture changed when the employees were told that if the program was successful, there would be more opportunities for work, not fewer.

"When morale is lousy, the place is, too. It's when Willowbrook employees are working successfully that the morale is up," said Sheldon. He conceded that all is not good throughout the complex.

"Sure, there has been progress, but not as much as we'd like. It's slow but it's happening," Sheldon said.

"Willowbrook is like Rip Van Winkle, asleep for years. Suddenly the giant started stirring," he said. "Stone age" ideas about care were in conflict with "rudely thrust modern expectations, which included rehabilitation instead of mere medical custody. Staff wasn't equipped for that. They had to learn. Granted, progress is slow, but it's there," he declared.

It was certainly much in evidence in Building 18, with its brightly decorated classrooms and recreation room.

"It's come a long way in a few years," said the nursing administrator, Peg Bilyck. "We even have our own dental clinic."

Educational programs are geared not only to the mentally retarded but also to those whose retardation is compounded by other handicaps. One classroom, for example, had 12 deaf and blind stu-

dent. "The Willowbrook problem that in many instances we have to try to teach the almost unteachable, such as the case with the blind and deaf. But we're at least trying," said Sheldon.