

Willowbrook lag is cited

By SUSAN FRY

One of the country's foremost experts in special education said yesterday in Brooklyn Federal Court that in a nine-year interval between his visits to the Willowbrook Developmental Center few changes had been made at the institution.

Dr. Burton Blatt, professor and chairman of the Division of Special Education and Rehabilitation at Syracuse University, told Judge Orrin G. Judd that when he went to the institution two weeks ago he found "little different about dormitory life" since his last visit in 1965.

He noted, however, that the center was less crowded and more residents were clothed.

A former commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health and first vice president of the American Association for Mental Deficiency, Dr. Blatt further testified that although studies have shown that mental

retardation is "modifiable," his impression from observations and discussions at Willowbrook indicate that attitudes there are in "contrast to this central theme."

He criticized the institution for "primitive" record-keeping, few curriculum developmental programs and "perfunctory and sketchy" planning.

Dr. Blatt is the author of "Christmas in Purgatory," a pictorial expose on institutional life, and is considered by his colleagues to be one of five top authorities in special education of the handicapped.

Describing a scene he observed at Willowbrook in which a resident was "banging his head against a wall and an attendant, not more than 15 feet away, didn't do anything to stop him," Dr. Blatt said: "I see

no opportunity for residents to model themselves after anyone."

He recommended that Willowbrook be thoroughly evaluated and funds shifted to developing community services and that plans be developed for "effective evacuation" of the

institution overseen by a board of outside experts.

"The state should pursue the placement of residents in the community just as if it were the parent," he concluded.

In other testimony of the second day of resumed hearings, a Wagner College graduate and former teacher at Willowbrook was critical of the lack of communication between teachers and their supervisors.

Mrs. Judith MacNamara, who now lives in Amherst, Mass., said that attitudes of supervisors are "negative."

"We were made to feel when we went to them (supervisors) with problems, that we were the problems. After a while we lost our self-motivation.

"Progress was slow and plodding, working in a dehumanizing environment. Residents have adopted a dog-eat-dog lifestyle so obvious on the wards."

Mrs. MacNamara said that nine of 11 children with Down's Syndrome, with whom she worked with for three years, have now been placed in foster homes.

Characterizing the children as originally "animalistic," she attributed her success to warm, personal relationships she established with them and strict, individual educational programs she designed.

Madeline E. Dalton, director of the Board of Education's Bureau for Children with Retarded Mental Development, said the city is able to absorb

Willowbrook residents into its educational programs.

The hearings continue today in the class action suit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Legal Aid Society on behalf of the New York State Association for Retarded Children against the state.

Plaintiffs are seeking in the landmark case the constitutional right of Willowbrook residents to treatment.