Computer Science Program To Aid Willowbrook Patients

MANHATTAN—An experiment combining computer science with personalized services and intended to increase retarded Willowbrook patients' chances for more normal lives was announced by Bernice L. Bernstein, Health, Education and Welfare Department regional director.

A three-year pilot project, involving about 100 patients at Staten Island's Willowbrook Developmental Center, will test the value of automated data systems in setting up a patient's training and treatment program and keeping watch on his progress toward a specific goal and, possibly, release from the institution.

Cost of the project is $2.6 million, 75 percent of which comes from HEW funds and the remainder from the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene.

Participants

Ms. Bernstein said the first of 20 staff members for the project would be hired this month, and all should be on the job by January. Patients in the study, all residents of one building, range in age from 20 to 50 years. Younger residents will be added to the sample later to make the study more representative of the general Willowbrook population.

"Each patient in the project," she said, "will receive careful neurological, pediatric, social, psychological, and vocational diagnosis. A team of specialists will judge each individual's abilities, and list the areas where help is needed. An individual rehabilitation plan will be spelled out that will include a timetable and milestones for reaching goals in personal hygiene, vocational skills, self care, and so on."

Meeting Goals

"This information will be entered in the computer, which will be used to check delivery of the services according to each person's timetable. As the patient meets the goals set for him, new ones will be set, until the patient develops to his full potential, which may include leaving Willowbrook."

Anthony S. DeSimone, Rehabilitation Services associate regional commissioner, said the new staff would include computer programmers, research scientists, a consulting psychiatrist, and other clinical staff.

'One-On-One'

In addition to the project staff, sufficient members of the regular Willowbrook staff will be assigned to the new unit to maintain a patient-staff ratio of one-to-one.

Mr. DeSimone said using the computer was expected to make it possible for staff to serve larger numbers of people as individuals.

"Once the feasibility of the approach is established," he said, "the system has sufficient capacity for the entire Willowbrook population of 3,000.

"We think the system can be modified and adapted for other long-term care situations, such as nursing homes. It's a development that's long overdue."