



Harold C. Piepenbrink finds paperwork awaiting him as he takes over as director of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silverstein

New Willowbrook chief gets first look at the job

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Gray skies, rainy weather, darkened buildings and the death of a resident greeted Harold C. Piepenbrink, the new director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, yesterday morning.

Through it, Piepenbrink managed to exude optimism and confidence, declaring on his first day on the job that Willowbrook is indeed a manageable institution.

"I don't buy it," Piepenbrink said, when asked if he agreed that the nationally spotlighted, long-troubled institution for the retarded was

unmanageable and impossible to tame.

Piepenbrink, a long-time mental health administrator in Illinois, made clear his intention yesterday to reorganize the management structure of Willowbrook. He said that the Department of Mental Hygiene had given him complete freedom to reorganize as he sees fit.

"I wouldn't have taken the job without that freedom," he said.

Piepenbrink said that he hoped to decentralize the chain of command that now exists at Willowbrook. Presently there are two deputy

directors, one for clinical matters, the other for administration.

Piepenbrink said that he hoped eventually to have six or seven program directors who would be responsible for given areas. "I don't want to have to see decisions made all the way up to the top all the time," Piepenbrink said.

In the future, he said, there might be anywhere from six to 10 persons who would report directly to the director.

Acting Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb reportedly coaxed Piepenbrink from his director's

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post at Tinley Park Mental Health Center, a state institution in a Chicago suburb, because of his managerial skills.

Piepenbrink's predecessor, Dr. Miodrag Ristic, was forced in October to transfer to a senior research post at another department facility because, his critics charged, of a lack of managerial skill. Ristic denied the charge to the end.

The Piepenbrink appointment was met in some circles by criticism. Dr. Gunnar Dybwad, an internationally renowned scholar in mental retardation, declared that a specialist in mental retardation was needed for the director's post.

Piepenbrink said yesterday that neither a physician nor a retardation specialist was necessary for the job, but simply a man who could "direct the institution."

Yesterday, Piepenbrink came into Willowbrook saying he hadn't heard "too many good things" about the institution, which houses almost 3,000 retarded residents and employs more than 4,000 staffers.

He spent part of his first day being briefed by the deputy directors whose duties, in part, he will be attempting to water down and redistribute.

His morning hours were spent in his new office in relative darkness because of a planned power outage that had lights out from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. The outage will be repeated today while electrical repairs take place again.

In a statement from his Albany office, Commissioner Kolb said that he was "delighted" that Piepenbrink had decided to take the "challenging" Willowbrook job. Aides to Kolb had confirmed the Piepenbrink appointment as early as February.

However, perhaps because of a post-Watergate morality and the fear of the Carey administration of a possible scandal, the official announcement was held up until yesterday so that a "complete check" of Piepenbrink's background could be made.

The investigation, according to a Kolb aide, was made at the insistence of the governor.

Piepenbrink said yesterday that he didn't know the cause of the delay, but that he had

accepted the job and was set to come to Staten Island for more than a month.

Piepenbrink, who takes over for acting director James A. Forde, said that he had heard the "typical things" about Willowbrook. After a few hours on the job, however, he was sure of one thing.

Apathy, he said, must be a problem as Willowbrook. He cited "external things," like cars that have been parked on grass areas in front of and adjacent to buildings.

"Dammit," he said, "if there are no parking lots, get a bulldozer, clear a lot and put some gravel for cars. A lot of attention has to be paid to the staff."

Staff morale, Piepenbrink said, would be bound to improve when "the whole idea of lines of authority" are established.

He said that a top priority has to be "getting the support of the people working" at Willowbrook. He suggested large meetings as a quick, initial step. After that, he said, he would "stop in buildings at different times of day and night to let them see you don't have five heads."

The most important aspect of administration-employee relations, he stressed, is being "honest and fair."

Piepenbrink said he is well aware that he is stepping into a hornet's nest of trouble, but that in his previous jobs he had walked into similar situations.

"It's the kind of job I want," he said. "I wouldn't take a job in a place that is well run. I don't want to follow that good an act."

Does he expect the Willowbrook director's post to be a 24-hour job?

"Sure," he said, "but not forever. If after a while the phone keeps ringing at all hours of the night, then something is wrong. That would be an indicator that the reorganization is not working."

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