

A Ray of Optimism Pierces Willowbrook

By MARY ENGELS

For almost two years Willowbrook Developmental Center's staff on Staten Island as been looking at the feasibility of dividing the giant complex into geographical units. On April 21, the first of these units will open in Building 29 when 36 patients are transferred from other parts of the center.

The unit is restricted to Staten Island residents. Where overcrowded wards used to abound, some housing as many as 70 residents in one room, smaller units for two and four patients are being established, set-off by partitions.

Dr. Stanley A. Slawinski, chief of services for the Staten Island Unit, said of the project: "It is like a breath of fresh air. At last we can be optimistic that things are happening at Willowbrook that are not on the negative side."

Slawinski, said 200 of Willowbrook's 3,000 residents are from Richmond County.

Extensive Renovation

Those not housed in Building 29 will be moved to adjacent units as the project develops. The building, which formerly housed spastic patients, is being extensively renovated.

Old-fashioned light bulbs are being replaced by fluorescent lighting and dreary-looking blue walls are being given a coat of bright yellow paint.

When the building is full in June, only 70 residents will reside where 150 once lived.

"The patients from building 29 have been moved to other sections of Willowbrook, or have gone back to the community — either to their own homes or to smaller community facilities," explained Slawinski. He said the project had been thoroughly examined by parents, staff and faculty before being tried.

The new project, by relying on a team approach and having fewer residents to work with, aims at improving services for them.

'Can't Expect Miracles'

"We can't anticipate and expect miracles," he said. "but we certainly will explore untapped potential of the residents in our care and use every expertise available to us to offer them the services they require," the doctor continued

"No one knows if it will work, we hope to demonstrate that it works in one building."

Slawinski said there has been one negative aspect so far, a rebound anxiety on the part of the staff, who felt this might mean an end to their jobs. "We tell them that we need all the expertise and help we can get to help with project."

Willowbrook has also received federal help to design and implement a new, computerized record system for the mentally retarded.

Sees 'Perfect Timing'

Called the "New York State Project," it will be tried in the new Staten Island Unit under the supervision of Dr. Jeffrey Crawford of Rockford State Hospital.

In describing the plan, Crawford said: "Basically it's a way of treating patients by giving them objectives, setting goals for individuals and through review of individuals and how will they achieve these goals seeing what methods work and what ones don't work."

Slawinski views "the marriage of the two projects, as one of perfect timing."



A typical area of Willowbrook that is being renovated and where overcrowding will be eliminated and services improved.