

Transfers Can Be for Better or Worse

By MURRAY SCHUMACH

Merely transferring retardates from the Willowbrook Developmental Center has not, of itself, improved the plight of those who were transferred or those who remained in the state institution.

News Analysis

In some cases, the patients were no better off at the new place. In others, their situation was considerably improved. And long after hundreds of patients had been transferred by court order from Willowbrook, conditions at the Staten Island institution were shown to be still bad, and the director was transferred.

Moreover, the capacity for improvement of the patients has varied with their condition. Some clearly should not have been placed in such institutions. Others were so badly brain-damaged that the most that could be hoped for in improvement was that they would be taught to dress and feed themselves.

These considerable variables have impelled voluntary organizations dedicated to the care of the mentally retarded to sponsor the bill to take the care of the mentally retarded away from the Department of Mental Hygiene and give it to a new agency directly responsible to the Governor.

This bill has passed both houses of the Legislature by substantial margins despite the fact that Governor Carey, after approving the idea during his campaign, has opposed it this year.

Thus, the New York State Association for Retarded Children, major plaintiff in the action that brought about yesterday's consent decree, had serious reservations.

Elliot L. Aronin, president of the association, expressed this feeling, after the decree, when he said:

"The success or failure of the objectives of this consent hinge almost entirely on the bureaucracy charged with implementing it. This implementation rests in the same bureaucracy which created and perpetuated Willowbrook and failed to carry out to any great degree the interim order of Judge Judd (Federal Judge Orrin G. Judd).

"We are hopeful, however, that this consent will become more than a lengthy scrap of paper because there is now the possibility of the creation of a different vehicle for its implementation. This vehicle is the creation of an office of mental retardation in the executive department.

Care Varies Widely

The Governor's own mental-health study group, set up after his election, took a similar position through its subcommittee on mental retardation.

The wide range in the care of retardates transferred from Willowbrook was illustrated at several places visited last year by reporters from The New York Times.

On Wards Island, where more than 60 retardates, most of them children, had been sent by the State Department of Mental Hygiene, patients seemed to be receiving little that would improve their condition. Most of the time they merely clung to one another in enclosed porches or crawled about. One blind child was on the floor of an empty room clawing at her eyes.

An employe there said: "I've never seen anything so mis-managed."

Chris Hanson, staff lawyer for the mental-health law project, which is connected with the Civil Liberties Union, said: "This is worse than Willowbrook and Willowbrook was horrible."

On the other hand, there

is the case of Margaret Denny, who has taken in small numbers of children from Willowbrook and has had enormous success with them at her home on Staten Island.

One boy, for instance, was unable to feed himself when he came to her, though he was 6 years old. After living at the Denny home with several other children from Willowbrook, he was playing with normal children in the neighborhood and was learning to talk.

"When his true parents came here," Mrs. Denny said, "they were flabbergasted. I think it was the first time they had kissed him in a long time."

Though the law permits Willowbrook to place as many as 15 retardates with a foster family, the practice has been not to exceed five.

Carey Visited Center

Governor Carey favors the small community facility instead of the large institution for mental retardates. After an inspection of Willowbrook last December, he cited a brownstone facility in Brooklyn sponsored by the Catholic Charities' office for the handicapped as "working well." This facility, Garfield Manor, at 305 Garfield Manor, at 305 Garfield Place, had 10 adults, seven of them formerly at Willowbrook. It was managed by a married couple.

Despite such operations, voluntary organizations in the mental-health field argue that the Department of Mental Hygiene looks upon mental retardation as a mental problem instead of an educational one. The subcommittee on mental retardation of the Governor's mental-health study group said:

"Education, because of its basic importance, should play a prominent role throughout this service program."