

Willowbrook suffering — will it ever come to end?

By ROBERT MIRALDI

When will it all end, the madness that is Willowbrook Developmental Center? When will the headlines cease and desist? When will the suffering end?

When will the disfigured, gnarled, retarded person living at Willowbrook be allowed "normalization"? When will the overwrought, guilt-ridden, desperate parent find some relief, some solace?

When will the most civilized civilization in the history of mankind find a humane, sensible, decent mode of living vehicle for the retarded? When will it all end...30 years of misery at Willowbrook Developmental Center?

In this, 1975, the federal court of the United States has ordered that Willowbrook Developmental Center, that off-the-road, much-talked-about, "carnival" that you've read so much about, that you've seen

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from the Willowbrook park ballfield or from a seat on the R-112 bus, must close up the show in six years.

By 1981, a federal judge has told the state administration, on behalf of some members of that state, who were acting on behalf of the helpless, smiling retardates, you must virtually close up that alleged hell-hole.

It just can't be done, the judge was saying, you just can't put 6,000 or 3,000 or 1,000 retardates in that sprawling place and make it livable, workable; you can't make it a place where a retarded person can progress as far as his retarded brain will allow.

It can't be done...so here's what you must do.

First, within 45 days, get yourself an advisory panel. Put some experts on it, some parents, some administration. Do that in 45 days and call it a review panel.

And second, for the next six years, work in two directions — top-rated; no insects, normal clothes, planned rehabilitation, brushed teeth, clean toilets, caring doctors, that is the first direction.

While one hand does that, the other must act to close this top-flight, top-rate, humanizing institution, to all but a hard core of Staten Island residents. That makes sense doesn't it?

Make it good, the institution, and then get just about everybody out of the place.

The world's largest mental health bureaucracy, also known as the Department of Mental Hygiene, has made worse mistakes although never has it admitted to such an error: That Willowbrook and institutions its size have been a mammoth mistake.

"There will always be a need," Dr. Miodrag Ristig, the former director, with the stammering Hungarian accent was saying. "There will always," and he stutters on the always (aw-aw-aw-lways), "be a need for a Willowbrook."

"For the multiple handicapped," he adds, wrinkling his face.

For people who live on what hardened Willowbrook veterans used to call the "pretzel" ward there will always be the need for institutionalization, he was saying.

No one wants a crippled, blind, deformed, retarded person in his house. He can't go into a foster home, or into the Tysen St. halfway house facili-

ty that New Brightonites are trying to scuttle.

He stays in Building 29 or Building 9. He sits and moans, and the flies sit on him in the summer. He's someone's son, but the parent doesn't want him in the house.

Cliche of cliches: He's society's child. We all owe him the right to food, and clothes, and heat, and love. We all ought to brush that damn fly off his shoulder.

We all ought to help end Willowbrook's life as a behemoth. And we all ought to make it fly-less and dirt-free, and habitable and progressive, in the next six years.

New Brighton's Tysen St. is an important first step.

A panel of caring, competent, sensitive people, working for the retarded, and not the pocketbook or the ballot box, is a second vital step.

And step three is for the parents and the staff at Willowbrook, the much-maligned, underpaid, alternately disgusted, feuing and sensitive staff, to close ranks and work as one, to convince, if only themselves, that Willowbrook can make life worth living for 3,000 retarded people.

It will be easier said—and written about—than done.

The last act in the Willowbrook saga is about to be written.