

# Bright Isle Home for

# Willowbrook 'Exiles'

By MARY ENGELS

It's a far cry from the wards of Willowbrook Developmental Center to the motel-like atmosphere of the new Nina Eaton Treatment Center in Staten Island, but 50 severely multiply disabled people made the trip last week, happily adjusting to the change.

"It was remarkable to see the difference even the first day made," said Robert Schonhorn, executive director of the United Cerebral Palsy Association, which runs the new facility. It is located on the grounds of the South Beach Psychiatric Center.

Schonhorn explained that the facility was an outgrowth of a project UCP of New York State has had under way for more than two years, sending professional teams into Willowbrook to work with aides, attendants and patients to improve the institution's care program.

The transfer of the Willowbrook residents, all regarded victims of cerebral palsy, was part of the continuing program to reduce the size of Willowbrook, eliminate overcrowding and decentralize care.

"Now we are becoming one of the first, private, non-profit agencies in the country to take a sizeable number of disabled people out of an institution and into an open facility," Schonhorn said. "Here they will be part of the community instead of shut behind walls."

Although there are those who contend that moving residents from one institution to another is not the answer, Schonhorn disagreed.

"This new facility in Building D, which was given to us by the state Department of Mental Hygiene, is a self-contained unit that we like to think of as a home," he said. The place has 20 double and ten single rooms on each of its two floors.

Future plans call for moving 50 more residents from Willowbrook to the second floor.

Touring the building, one is impressed by the colorful surroundings, a far cry from the bleakness of some of Willowbrook's buildings. Nothing has institutional-looking. The airy rooms, with a view of the greenery surrounding the building, are done in yellows, greens, reds and blues.

There is privacy in the residents' own rooms, as well as the opportunity for group activities in the various recreation, training and social activity areas.

Because of shortages of money, "we had to settle for the basics, rather than the frills," a staff member commented. Staffers said they hoped to get colorful shades and possibly a television or two in time.

Funding for the program is coming from the Department of Mental Hygiene to the tune of \$750,000 for the first six months.

"After that, we hope to go on medicaid," said Schonhorn.

"The beauty of the center," he said, "is that it has a ratio of one and a half staff to every resident, more than the recent court decree ordering the decentralization of Willowbrook residents requires for a facility of this kind."

There are 81 staff members. Many of the attendants were formerly on welfare. Residents who hail from all the boroughs range in age from 18 to 48 years.



Robert Schonhorn, executive director of the United Cerebral Palsy Association, looks over grounds of Nina Eaton Center.

Schonhorn said the first goal of the facility will be to teach the residents "the basics." They have been institutionalized from 11 to 33 years and don't even know the fundamentals of eating, toilet training and the like.

"By working on a nearby one-to-one basis, we will be able to see what each individual's capabilities are and then take steps in rehabilitation programs accordingly.

"It will almost amount to individual instruction for individual needs. That's a far cry from what they had before," he said.

"Another sad thing is that many of them have lived for 15 years in isolation and are withdrawn, so our staff will have to work on that as well."

"Our workers have already been informed that this won't be strictly a five-day work week type of

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job. They will be required to come in on various hours schedules, some from 9 to 5, others from noon to 8 p.m., for example, so that there will always be people and programs ready to serve the residents," he said.

"There will also be an open-door policy so parents and family can visit at any time, not just on specified days and hours, as with most institutions.

"We also hope in time to have members of the community, maybe some senior citizens,

drop in and socialize. Community acceptance is an important part of the program and one which we try to work out even before going into an area."

Currently United Cerebral Palsy is working with civic groups in the Bronx to develop a similar program at the Bronx Developmental Center.

Although Staten Island's new facility has residents from a mixture of boroughs, the Bronx unit will have about 60 Willowbrook residents who hail from that borough only.