

New Chief Is Shaking Up Willowbrook

It has been a little over five months since Harold C. Piepenbrink took over the director's job at the Willowbrook Development Center on Staten Island—and he has found it harder than he expected.

The man from Illinois said that in some ways it seemed even longer than five months. "My reason for being here in the first place," he said with candor, is the challenge.

"I had been 5½ years at the Timley Mental Health Center in Illinois where I was superintendent. Prior to that, I was the superintendent of a large state hospital, Manteno, also Illinois, with 8,000 residents. So I guess you might say I felt I had the experience to tackle Willowbrook."

He found conditions at the center, a perennial target of criticism and media exposes, worse than he thought.

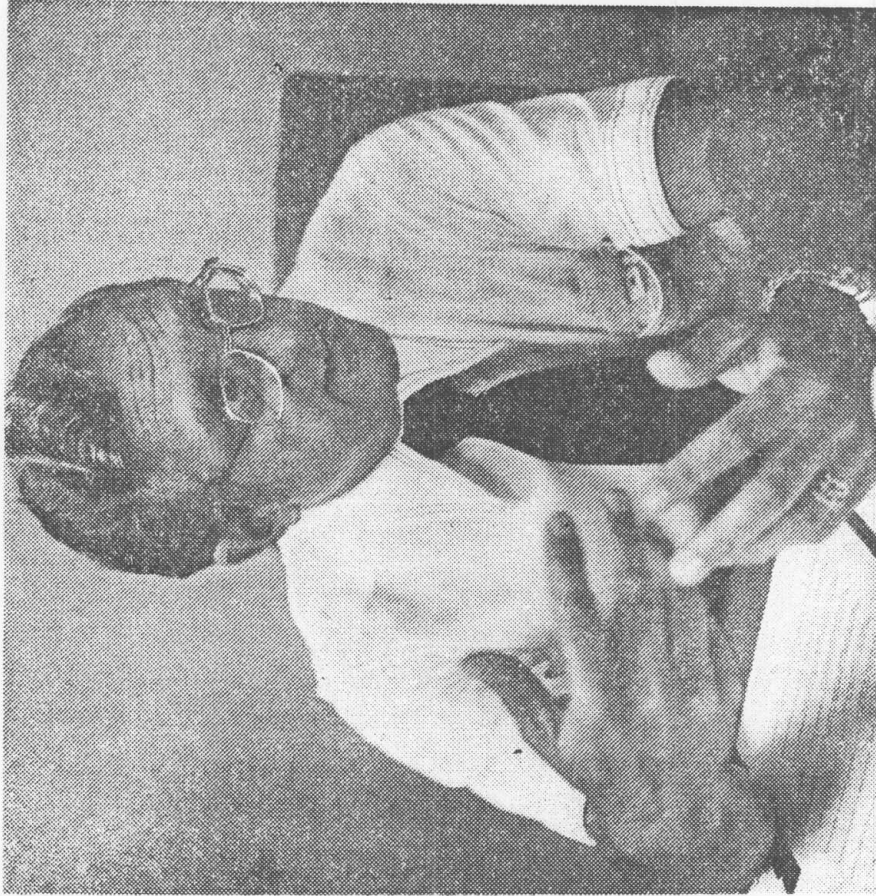
But he quickly added: "Some were worse, some better."

Lack of Organization

"What really blew my mind, though, was the complete lack of organization," said Piepenbrink. Upon arrival he had asked for an organization chart listing the number of employees, residents and buildings, the amount of land and the like. "When they told me one didn't exist, I couldn't believe that a place this size and scope functioned in such a disorderly fashion," he said. "I am a firm believer in order in getting things done."

He quickly set about rectifying the situation. Now when asked, he can rattle off: "There are 3,979 positions, some 2,730 residents, 381 acres of land. And, yes, there is now an organization chart which lists everyone's job and the various units they are assigned to."

In his short time in office, he said, he has managed to organize a top layer of clinical administrators, directors and deputies to head up the various units



News photo by Jim Romano
It's the challenge that motivates me," says Harold Piepenbrink during interview.

and report on a reevaluation of each resident in various areas. "I was amazed at the lack of procedures," he said, so he set up a chain of command.

"I see the running of this facility as a staff effort, everyone working as a team, not just a one-man operation," he declared.

To deal with concerned and sometimes hostile parents' groups, Piepenbrink hired a consumer affairs assistant Marie McCartin.

"She will be my intermediary when I cannot meet with the parents myself," he explained. "I believe in an open-door policy. We are not out to hide anything

here, and I don't consider myself an adversary of anyone."

The six years ahead won't be easy for Piepenbrink. In a recent court decree, Willowbrook was ordered to pare down its size to about 250 residents within that time, all of the residents to come from Staten Island.

'It Won't Be Easy'

"Sure," Piepenbrink said, "it won't be easy. We have to see what other boroughs and other parts of the state can accept some of our residents and preferably put them on their own communities."

"We also have to move many into group homes, and the way for this has to be paved with meetings with community groups. Meanwhile, we have to continue to function the best way we can with what we have here."

There had been talk recently of eventual demolition of some Willowbrook buildings.

Piepenbrink said that a proposal to that effect (he emphasized the word "proposal") had been suggested by him as part of a possible long-range plan.

"We are dealing with buildings that are 40 years old, all centrally heated and air conditioned by one power plant, and it may be too expensive to renovate them," he explained.

Looks to the Future

"If the costs of building separate, smaller houses are comparable to renovation, or cheaper, it makes more sense to go that route. And that, and only that, is what I suggested."

While not immune to criticism, the director feels that one cannot worry about the mistakes of the past, but must concentrate on the future.

"You know," he said reflectively, "we are like a ship at sea that has been torpedoed in five places, yet we are required to fix it while it is still moving. The complexities required of such a job—to put it together when you know it needs a major overhaul—is mind-boggling."

—Mary Engels