

PARENTS/CHILDREN

From Willowbrook to Foster Care:

A Tough Job

By RICHARD FLASTE

Foster parents have always had to be ready for some hardship. You never could know how bad a time that child had experienced before he got to you and how difficult to live with he might be as a result.

But the job you can apply for now may be harder still. The push is on—because of a court-supervised agreement—to transfer most of the residents of the Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island back to the communities they came from. About a third of the 2,600 people there are said to be suitable for foster care—not so seriously handicapped as to be a near impossibility around the house. But difficult nevertheless.

If you decide you wish to take in a child (about half the residents are children) you might be in for an initial shock or two.

When Racquel Perez first met Blanca, a 17-year-old with Down's syndrome, sometimes called mongolism, Mrs. Perez brought the child a steak. Blanca proceeded to rip the meat apart with her hands. She also did not talk, except insofar as she was "echolalic"—she repeated whatever she heard. But she had been a resident at Willowbrook for nearly a decade, from 1966 to last year. And, institutionalization had made her less than she could have been and left a lot of room for improvement.

Thomas Coughlin, the state's deputy commissioner for mental retardation who has recently taken charge of Willowbrook, says that the child you might get would certainly bear the emotional marks of that institution.

What the foster parent can expect, he said, "is a highly regimented child." For instance, at Willowbrook the children learn to walk down the hall on the right side only, and a child will do that, at first, in your home.

The child might have learned some bizarre behavior while at Willowbrook as he tried to pass the time. He might sit there rocking back and forth in a corner or compulsively twirl twine around his fingers. The child may not be toilet trained, although a majority are.

But all of these problems may be overcome in the care of a family. That's the reason such importance is being placed on finding homes. It's called "normalization" and is intended as an antidote to the deprivations of an institution.

Careful Planning Vital

And one thing that the State Department of Mental Hygiene, as well as the developmental centers in each borough working with the state appears to have learned from the "dumping" problems encountered when state mental hospitals previously sent patients into an unprepared community is that there does have to be careful preparation.

So after months of virtual inactivity, the state recently set up the Metropolitan Placement Unit at 2 World Trade Center to facilitate the finding of foster care homes. (Its phone number is 488- (Mail should be address to Barbara Blum the director, and the phone number is 488-7024.)

It has also just begun implementing a system in which every resident who leaves Willowbrook will have a written plan on the school he will attend, the doctor who will treat him for any illnesses and any additional training he will receive.

Up to now, there have been a number of problems in placing Willowbrook people in family care. In the Bronx, at the sophisticated developmental center that is affiliated with the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the staff has been doing this kind of thing since before last year's Willowbrook agreement, and it has run into a good deal of frustration.

One difficulty, the staff says, is that 40 percent of the residents' parents resist giving the necessary consent to have their children removed from the institution.

Years ago, when they entered their children in that institution, these parents felt they had no alternative. They could not be trained to keep the children at home; they were persuaded that Willowbrook was the only way. Now they refuse to be persuaded otherwise and many will not accept the children back, even with training for parent and child, nor will they permit the children to enter foster care where, the parents fear, necessary facilities and supervision will be absent.

Parental resistance has, on occasion, angered Dr. Herbert Cohen, who directs the Bronx center. He recalls "two children who deteriorated significantly" after an unsuccessful attempt to get parental consent for their release.

Sometimes, it is difficult to find applicants to do the foster caring, despite the \$273 a month paid for each person in care.

Although plans are afoot to standardize the training offered foster parents, the training and the requirements for eligibility have varied somewhat from borough to borough.

At the Bronx center, the requirements read like this: The family must prove room is available in the home, pass a home safety inspection, pass medical examinations, provide references and attend a eight-session training course on the problems that come up in caring for the retarded.

There is also an array of other services that come into play, including advanced training for families who must deal with greater difficulties and a system of continuing contact with the center after placement.

The centers have not excluded single parents. They have been looking for warm,

capable people to take on a very difficult job in their homes.

Trained People Sought

Dr. Erwin Friedman, director of the Manhattan Developmental Center, is hoping for even more than that. He'd like to see some professionally trained people apply—retired nurses, for instance, or those with some background in psychology or social work.

There is some difference of opinion at the centers

over how important that \$273 a month ought to be in the mind of an applicant.

Dorothy Jacobs, the family care coordinator in the Bronx, looks askance at applicants who are "in it for the money." Dr. Friedman thinks "that's a phony issue—I'm getting paid to take care of people and if families want to take in three or four people as employment I don't see anything wrong with that."

All those involved in this massive effort, however, want the ultimate reward to be the satisfaction one gets from the act of caring.

That seems to be the main reason Abe and Johnnie Truman got into foster care. Mr. Truman, a 68-year-old retired building superintendent, and his wife have taken in four handicapped youths.

The other day Eddie, a 14-year-old Down's syndrome child who could not use silverware at Willowbrook, had just finished feeding himself some baby food and began banging the spoon on the jar to indicate a readiness for more.

Mr. Truman looked at him, beamed like any adoring parent, and said, "He's something else, isn't he?"