

Panel finds Willowbrook lags on court-ordered reform

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Willowbrook Developmental Center has made "limited progress" over the last six months, but it is still beset by serious staff, management, environment and programming problems.

Furthermore, says the Willowbrook Review Panel in its second six-month report to a federal court, many of the 2,600 retarded persons living at the center "are still languishing on the wards."

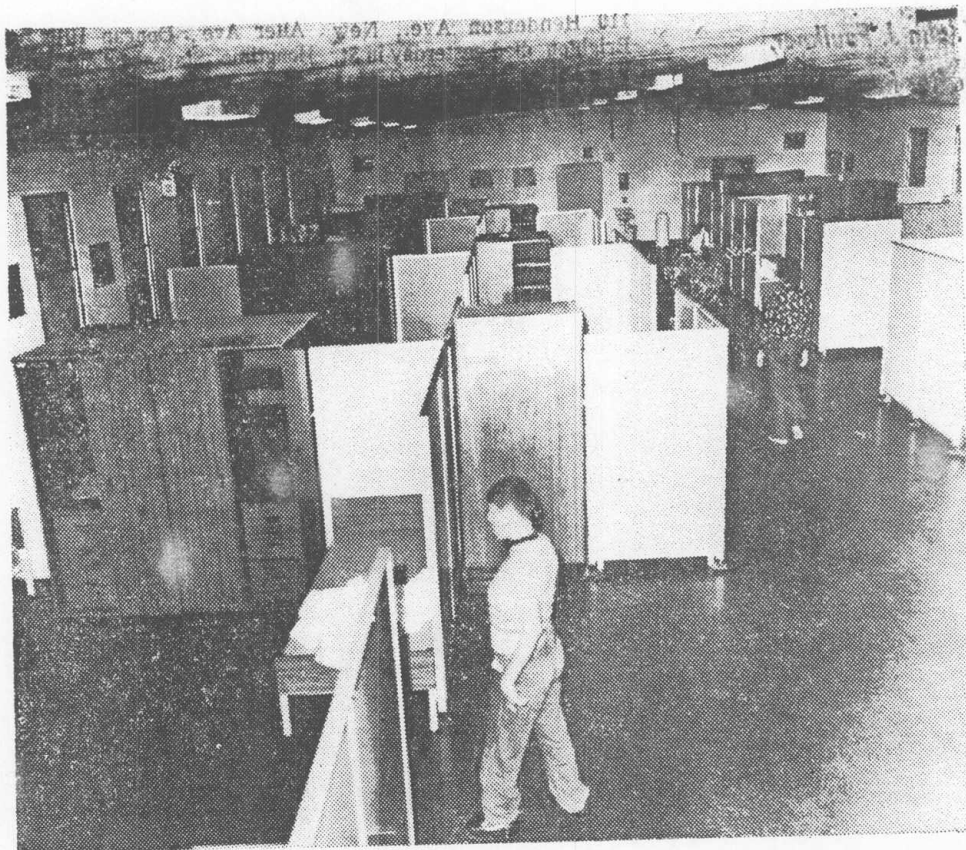
"The vast majority of Willowbrook residents still sleep in large open wards and are afforded little privacy or other elements of a normalized or home-like atmosphere," the 252-page report says.

Based on audits conducted at the center over the last two months, the independent court-appointed Review Panel found that 12 and 13-month deadlines imposed by the court "have not been met with regard to most of the requirements" of a consent decree signed in April 1975 by Gov. Carey.

The deadlines were to be the object of a July 23 contempt proceeding in U.S. District Court, Brooklyn. Attorneys for parents' groups have been considering seeking jail sentences or fines against top state officials, including Gov. Carey, to speed up change at the long-troubled Willowbrook.

However, the death last Thursday of the judge in the case, Orrin G. Judd, has put off indefinitely the July 23 hearing. No decision will be made on the eventual disposition of the case until after tomorrow.

Thomas A. Coughlin, acting Willowbrook director and a deputy commissioner for the state Department of Mental Hygiene, said yesterday that the Review Panel report is a "fair presentation of where we stand."



Some wards in Willowbrook Developmental Center have been compartmentalized to afford residents a little privacy.

"As a general statement," Coughlin said, "it's a question of speed. We've not moved as quickly as we should have, although I'm not saying we could have moved quicker."

Coughlin pointed to understaffing as the biggest continuing problem at Willowbrook, which has 4,300 employees and a budget authorization to hire an additional 500 staffers.

The Review Panel report documents the understaffing. In 90 per cent of the buildings sampled, the panel found "definite staff deficits." In the other 10 per cent, mandated staff ratios were "questionable," the panel found.

In one building, the panel found a 47 per cent overall

deficit. "The inescapable conclusion is that the staffing deficits continue to be most active at the times most residents are present on the wards and few, if any, clinical staff are available for programs or structured activities."

Historically, staff deficits, training and turnover (about 30 per cent) have been major problems at Willowbrook. The result, observers point out, is uneven care, unprepared staff and a poor delivery of services.

According to Coughlin, part of the staffing problem has been caused by a mixup in projected population at Willowbrook. Transfers of resi-

dents to other developmental centers had been slated in 1975 and staff was slated to follow the residents.

The transfers were rejected by the Review Panel, however, and it was not until January that the staff was reassigned to Willowbrook, Coughlin said.

A May report of the Department of Mental Hygiene admitted "that professional or specialized personnel shortages have been the root cause for inadequate delivery of services" at Willowbrook and promised "innovative and special recruitment activity."

The Review Panel called the department's May promises "replete with generalizations and vague promises of future actions."

The other major Willowbrook problems highlighted by the report include:

¶ Management: "Institutional management has proved to be a persistent problem," the report says, pointing to Coughlin's April statement that Willowbrook was "administratively out of control."

The report cites management failures in closing the center's psychiatric ward, which led to numerous injuries to residents; an inability over eight months to restore 140 residents to education programs in which they were enrolled; the chronic shortage of clothing, linen and wheelchairs; the failure to hire and deploy adequate staff; lack of coordination of various disciplines; and an absence of a comprehensive plan for bringing Willowbrook into compliance with court orders.

"Genuine progress" in one



Most of the residents sleep in large open wards, however.

S.I. Advance Photos by Tony Carannante

area of Willowbrook living "fails to result in any real benefits" for residents because of "the lack of any consistent, overall approach" to management, the panel said.

¶ Programming: About 56 per cent of residents surveyed were found to be participating in less than six hours of therapeutic programming and were, consequently, "languishing on the wards."

Coughlin said that residents without programs were most-

ly adults and that a "model education program" is currently under way which should eliminate the lack of programming over the next six months.

The most positive aspect of the state's attempts to dismantle and improve Willowbrook, the panel reported, has been with a placement plan where 131 residents have been relocated in community residences.

Although the state did not

meet the court deadline of 200 placements, the 131 placements "are of good quality and have conclusively demonstrated that there are positive alternatives to institutionalization for severely handicapped members of the class."

Coughlin estimated that Willowbrook's population should be reduced to 1,915 by April. By 1981 Willowbrook has been ordered to house only 250 residents.