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# Mental Hygiene regional chief named director of Willowbrook

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Dr. Levester Cannon has been visiting Willowbrook Developmental Center "off and on" for the past eight years, but as of today he will no longer be a visitor.

Dr. Cannon, 40, of Schenectady, N.Y., was officially named director of the 2,600-bed institution yesterday by Lawrence C. Kolb, commissioner of the state Department of Mental Hygiene.

"On the basis of his past experience," Kolb said in making the announcement, Cannon will "insure continued progress in implementing provisions" of the Willowbrook consent decree which outlines radical change at the center.

Dr. Cannon said yesterday that the 21-page consent decree "dictates what has to be done" and he said he sees his job as "trying to move the facility into compliance."

In a telephone interview from his Schenectady home, Cannon, who had been deputy director for the department's Mid-Hudson Regional Office, said he is "fairly familiar with problems" at Willowbrook.

Cannon, who has a doctorate in education, began as director of the state's Youth Opportunity Program in 1968 and rose to become the No. 2 man in the Mid-Hudson office by December 1975. He aided Mid-Hudson director, James A. Forde, when Forde was acting director at Willowbrook for four months in late 1975.

Cannon has never directed an institution, but he says he has "a lot of institutional experience" in helping run the Letchworth and Wassaic Developmental Centers in the Mid-Hudson Region.

When Cannon first saw Willowbrook eight years ago, it had 6,000 residents. Today, with 2,600 retarded persons living at the sprawling center, it is "just about at the breaking point," Cannon said, adding that he "sees progress" and feels he has an advantage because he is "fully aware of the extent of the problems."

The center's former director, Harold Piepenbrink, who came to Willowbrook from Chicago, was criticized because he was not familiar with state mental hygiene policies

and ran into problems with the state civil service system.

Numerous Willowbrook staffers complained about the "Chicago crew" that Piepenbrink brought with him to run Willowbrook. A serious intestinal operation caused Piepenbrink to resign in March after less than a year on the job.

Piepenbrink's predecessor, Dr. Miodrag Ristig, resigned in December 1974 under pressure from the department's regional office. Ristig was criticized as a poor administrator.

As he prepared to begin his first day as the \$43,800-a-year director, Dr. Cannon came under fire yesterday from the president of the Willowbrook Benevolent Society.

"We don't think he's qualified," said Mrs. Genevieve Kamen, president of the parents' organization. "We didn't get a choice. The parents have been completely ignored. He has never run an institution and we don't think he's qualified."

Parents have long complained that they have little or no voice in the formulating of

policy at Willowbrook.

Dr. Cannon, however, promised yesterday an "open kind of facility." He has already met with representatives of the Benevolent Society, the board of visitors, and the professional and consumer advisory boards established by the consent decree.

Cannon said he would like to see the Willowbrook staff retrained to be able to follow residents as they are placed in community facilities. Willowbrook has been ordered to reduce its population to 250 by 1981.

Earlier this week, the independent, court-appointed Willowbrook Review Panel, in its second six-month report, criticized Willowbrook for its poor management. "They're right," Cannon said. "But it's a matter of turning around a whole system of services."

"We have to make Willowbrook go before other centers will follow," Cannon said he is confident that Willowbrook will keep improving.

"Willowbrook is better off in many respects" than other state centers, he said.