

# Willowbrook Conditions Draw Parents' Protests

By MARY ENGELS

"Two, four, six, eight. Retarded children cannot wait."

That has been the battle cry of members of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, Willowbrook Chapter of the New York State Association for Retarded Children, as they've taken to protest lines recently to demonstrate against a number of conditions at the Developmental Center on Staten Island.

the society, consisting of parents of retarded children, is headed by Mrs. Genevieve A. Camen who son has been a resident of Willowbrook for almost 27 years.

"The shame of Willowbrook is that it should have been a dead issue five years ago," she charged, blaming "the Department of Mental Hygiene for not working with compassion for the residents."

## List of Shortcomings

Mrs. Camen, along with Anthony Pino, second vice president of the Benevolent Society, cited "poor supervision, lack of proper planning, mismanagement, understaffing, lack of progress in compliance with the consent judgment, marginal medical care" and a host of other grievances which they felt are not being properly taken care of by the Department of Mental Hygiene.

In April 1975 Gov. Carey, Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence G. Kolb and plaintiffs for parents' groups went to Brooklyn Federal Court demanding changes at Willowbrook. The court later issued a 26-page decree outlining changes to upgrade Willowbrook immediately and plans to close the center over a long period of time.

"Most of all," said Mrs. Camen, "is the recent decision by the department to appoint Dr. Lee Cannon to be the new director of Willowbrook without first consulting the society and giving it a choice in the selection as we were promised."

She added, "we feel that the director of Willowbrook should not be in any way connected with the Department of Mental Hygiene because he brings with him the department's locked in philosophy about the place."

Asked whom they would prefer in the post, both Camen and Pinto replied "a good administrator."

## Liked One Director

The pair agreed that of the five most recent directors, Harold Piepenbrink was the only one "who had set out to bring some kind of order to the place. Unfortunately he became ill and had to leave."

"In choosing a new director the department should have advertised for the post and mentioned the need for someone with administrative abilities," Mrs. Camen said. "How can someone 200 miles away in Albany hope to dictate how Willowbrook should be run?"

Pinto also said that the same hiring practices could be utilized for the employees at the center, many of whom come from New Jersey or other parts of New York to work there.

## "Dedicated Islanders"

"There are many dedicated Islanders who should be allowed to have the chance," he said.

The parents' group also objected strongly to the actions of the previous acting director, Thomas Coughlin, a deputy commissioner with the Department of Mental Hygiene, for closing down of Building 2 on the premises.

Mrs. Camen said, "The 60 residents were only transferred to other buildings at Willowbrook or returned to the community where there is no adequate planning being done for them."

She also said she knew that it was the eventual aim of the department to bring as many of the Willowbrook residents back to their own neighborhoods. However, "it still has not been properly planned as such for their acceptance," she added.

## Most Pressing Need

Pinto said that the parents' group sees "the most pressing need as one addressing the problems of the Willowbrook residents today coupled with the future needs."

"We can't," he said, "sacrifice today for the needs of tomorrow, which the department seems to be centering on."

The society vows to continue their protests and demonstrations until they get answers from the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Mrs. Camen said, "Commissioner Kolb has not answered the several calls I have made to him and until we hear from him or Gov. Carey we will not deal with their new director."

## Cannon's Position

In a recent interview Dr. Cannon said that he had met with the society prior to his appointment and hoped to work with them in the future.

He defended his position by saying the commissioner had wanted a director who knew the workings of the Department of Mental Hygiene and could thus expedite things promptly.

The present population at the center is about 2,500 and the administration hopes that by 1981 it will have achieved the necessary goal of 250 residents, which is mandated by court decree.

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