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Willowbrook Chief Is Finding Obstacles

By MARY ENGELS

While Willowbrook Development Center's conditions continue to draw protest from the parents group, The Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, the center's new director, Dr. Lee Cannon is trying to raise the morale of the staff while seeking to improve conditions there.

In the job almost two months, Cannon said "There is no question but that the position is a hot seat. The parents group refuses to meet with me," he said. "They call me Coughlin's puppet."

Cannon was referring to his boss, Deputy Commissioner Thomas Coughlin of the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, who had been acting Director of Willowbrook prior to Cannon's appointment.

The parents group, headed by Mrs. Genevieve Camen, blamed Coughlin for closing Building 2 on the premises. The move led to the transfer of 60 residents to other buildings in the complex, most of whom should have been under psychiatric care, the parents claimed.

The parents recently protested an incident involving a doctor who was injured by a resident who had been transferred to Building 21.

Cannon said "at the time no one bothered to mention that 13 of our staff had also been assaulted by the same person and that we were in the process of transferring her to a special apartment in Building 33 where she is directly under psychiatric care."

Of the closing of the building, Cannon said, "It might have been precipitous but he (Coughlin) was under tremendous pressure by almost everyone to close the place down."

Cannon sees his major goal as that "of building staff morale. They feel they are being blamed for everything that happens here and with that kind of attitude one really doesn't care about his work."

On the positive side, Cannon cited the former staff apartments in Building 33 that have been converted for the use of clients. "There, the former Behavior Modification unit residence, as well as our blind retardates are learning how to live in normal everyday type surroundings," he said.