

Willowbrook boss sees improvements in the system

By ROBERT MIRALDI

A deputy commissioner in the state's mental health bureaucracy allegedly said in April that Willowbrook Developmental Center was "administratively out of control." State officials did not deny the statement, and Willowbrook observers felt it was true.

Dr. Levester Cannon has been director — the top administrator — at Willowbrook for 16 weeks now. He is a tall man with a mellow, even voice. His job is to manage the sprawling, 2,595-bed institution that has been called "unmanageable" and has eaten up four directors in three years.

Is Willowbrook still administratively out of control?

"No," Dr. Cannon says. End of question. End of answer. Levester Cannon, 40, doctor of education, feels he has Willowbrook under control.

Flash fires "still break out," he admits, but "we have been able to reduce the crises."

The first four months have gone "better than expected," Cannon says. "I entered with a great deal of apprehension, but I'm generally more pleased than I originally thought I would be." Cannon entered the job, in fact, against the advice of friends and colleagues, including a former Willowbrook director.

Cannon can tell his friends now, however: "We are making progress in improving the overall delivery of services. It is slow, it is difficult. But it's not necessarily true that Willowbrook is unmanageable. What we need is a commitment on the part of administrators up and down the line.

"We have to define their responsibilities, make it clear what their jobs are and then see that the jobs are done."

Despite some haggling over semantics, Cannon should have his wishes. The state has submitted to the Willowbrook Review Panel a 1,000-page operational plan that details what has to be done to bring Willowbrook into compliance with federal mandates; it also notes by name who is responsible for individual tasks.



Levester Cannon

"There are problems here, but the major problem as I see it," Dr. Cannon said in a recent interview, "is that when you try to change a system you have to allow time for the change."

The Willowbrook consent decree is the document which has "changed the system." Its 21 pages tell Willowbrook officials just where the center has to go to provide "humanizing" conditions.

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