

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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"Agencies," Cannon says, "need time. Government has to gear up to make changes. The consent judgment is not a simple document." Cannon points out that to implement the decree the state has had to coordinate the Departments of Mental Hygiene, Education and Health and the Bureau of the Budget.

As Willowbrook observers have seen, big bureaucracies move slowly.

Cannon says that only "history will tell" if forcing the state to speed up the Willowbrook improvement process will be "harmful to residents." The state has already failed to meet 12 and 13-month compliance deadlines imposed by the decree; and attorneys for parent groups have threatened to seek contempt of court citations against top state officials.

Would contempt action speed up the Willowbrook process?

"I can't work any harder than I am," Cannon replies "Eighteen hours a day is all I can give. I have serious questions if I can keep up that pace."

That pace, as Cannon sees it, has helped bring progress in his first days at Willowbrook. Concerning two problem areas he sees:

¶ Staffing. The quality and quantity of the Willowbrook employe continues to be an issue and a problem. The Willowbrook Review Panel's last audit found 90 per cent of the center's buildings understaffed and a 30 per cent turnover in the 4,215-member staff.

Cannon expects that by mid-December court-ordered staff levels will have been reached, albeit five months after the court deadline. The 30 per cent turnover rate is for ward-level, direct-care staff who, Cannon says, "get frustrated" dealing with the retarded and "leave quickly."

"The only solution," Cannon says, "is to reduce the resident population. A high staff turnover is endemic to an urban population." It doesn't happen upstate where centers draw from stable small-town populations. "Where you recruit from is the problem," Cannon says.

Willowbrook is hiring 80 staffers a month. According to Cannon, the new staffers are being fingerprinted and checks are being made with law officials. The number of felons, alcoholics and drug addicts on staff has long been a complaint of Willowbrook parents.

Cannon says that compared to 1974 when he was an aide at Willowbrook to then director James A. Forde, the staff is better trained. The new operational plan will make the staff more accountable.

¶ Medical services. The services have been called inadequate by most observers. Cannon says services are improving and that the state is implementing a series of recommendations made by a consultant from Roosevelt Hospital in Manhattan.

One recommendation the state will not follow is to open Building 2, a huge, antiquated structure that had been used as an infirmary until its breakup in May. Residents were dispersed into other buildings, and disruption and injuries resulted.

The problems at Willowbrook, as Cannon has found out, are innumerable. "If you want to find something wrong, you can find it here," he says. "But Willowbrook is better off than other state centers. It has better programs."

And those programs will get better yet, Cannon says. He points to the light at the end of the tunnel, something no other director has done. In 18 to 24 months, he says, Willowbrook should be a "good" facility.

When the population is reduced to its projected level of 250 by 1981, the center could be "perfect," Cannon says.

"I don't know quite how long it will take," Cannon says, "but I'll be here till the job is done."

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