

# About New York

## When Will the Willowbrooks Vanish?

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

Willowbrook must be expunged, we all agreed, back when the startling pictures of institutionalized neglect glimmered on the TV screens as a reminder that someone—our government? us?—was packing away thousands of people like tarnished attic fixtures because they were deemed retarded.

So there was Walter, a smiling, strapping adult, asking a visitor last week to come see his new bedroom in a Lefrak City apartment, and proudly showing the pictures of locomotives and Batman, two of his favorite sights, that he had taped in neat patterns about the room.

This and numerous trappings of the noninstitutionalized—dinner for Walter and for his 11 other "family" members from among the retarded simmering aromatically on the stove, the living room stereo playing by great coincidence "The Me Nobody Knows," and a traffic jam snaking slowly outside on the expressway—confirmed the snugness of Walter's new home. Undeniably, it is better than Willowbrook.

But beware, it is dangerous to risk such favorable observations because we all know that the solution of one awful scandal has a way of breeding a new scandal, usually some monster of commerce and profiteering, as with the nursing-home and day-care problems. Barbara Blum, an assistant commissioner of the State Department of Mental Hygiene, is taxed with the massive job of ending Willowbrook, of removing its 2,500 remaining patients and finding more than 200 safe and suitable community residences for many of them, all within the city, by means of contracts with private agencies, and all free of scandal.

The pressures of her job sound immense. Already, justifiably frustrated parents have noted that the state's court agreement to improve the lives of Willowbrook patients is falling behind schedule. They suggest the court should confine top state officials to a Willowbrook ward as a prod. The need to rush is clear, but so are the numerous factors of resistance—finding apartments, satisfying state and city building codes, negotiating leases, overcoming community fears.

There are architects and brokers on the simple level of shelter, judges and lawyers on the civil rights level where each patient's custody is at stake, plus city planning boards and state auditors all required for the attempt to improve the Willowbrook situation.

Mrs. Blum figures she should be opening new "hostels," each suitable for about 10 patients plus around-the-clock professionals, at the rate of about five a month in the city for the next four and a half years to meet the court deadline of May, 1981 for solving the problem. Of the 250 apartments or other family settings she needs, 17 are open and 30 more are "in the pipeline." So there are 200 to go—one or more in each major neighborhood in the city, for which Mrs. Blum already has prepared special census studies to answer questions of "Why here?" Apartments, single-family homes, and old convents are being used.

Willowbrook is so expensive—costing an average of more than \$30,000 per patient annually—that the solution, even with sleep-in professionals at the hostels, is economical by comparison. There is a new generation of young professionals avid about the hostel approach, Mrs. Blum notes, exemplified by the relaxed, denim-clad workers at the two Lefrak hostels run by Young Adult Institute.

Mindful of the scandal threat, Mrs. Blum clears leases through the State Facilities Development Corporation. And where a chosen site exceeds market value she says she is careful to state on the record why. For example, she is leasing apartments in Marcus Garvey houses in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section at a slightly higher rent, feeling they are worth it because of the locale and the community need.

In the communities, there has been a strong resistance in some cases, particularly in "high-income, politically powerful" areas, she says. Little Neck, Queens, is remembered for its resistance, but some residents cooperated and a hostel will open there. Community planning boards are more often helpful than not, particularly if there is enough time to explain the program.

There have been anonymous threats reported on one landlord approached by the state, and currently a particular hospital is resisting leasing some of its state-subsidized apartments for a hostel, leaving Mrs. Blum planning state civil rights and housing actions and other officials furious at the hospital executives' advice to seek "other facilities that are currently being used for emotionally and economically disabled persons."

In a way, the more sensational symbol of the Willowbrook scandal an emaciated, near-naked child curled fetally on a ward floor—is part of the

current public education problem. The retarded are distinct from the mentally ill and they are far more adaptable to life situations, including jobs and subway rides for some residents of the Lefrak hostel, than the public suspects. Many of them vote and one woman in the Lefrak group worked in Daniel P. Moynihan's campaign. The more severely retarded will not be placed in hostels, but many hundreds of Willowbrook residents eventually are to live among the very public that demanded something better for them.