

Our opinion

Improvements retarded too

There have been more employes added to the staff of Willowbrook Developmental Center in recent months, but the problems there continue. The forecasts that the present resident population of almost 2,600 would decline by several hundred was made very early this year, but it hasn't. There are continuing accounts of abuse of patients not only by other patients but by employes of the center as well.

Some retarded people develop emotional problems which erupt in violence, and for many years there was a special isolation psychiatric ward there, but last spring that ward was ordered closed and its patients transferred to other buildings, where they could molest not only other residents but staff members as well.

"Clearly, Willowbrook should have the capacity to deal with such disruptive patients," the regional director of the state Mental Hygiene said last summer. But has that obvious need been fulfilled?

Dr. Levester Cannon, the center's present director, says it is his impression that there are fewer incidents of abuse and accidents than there have been in the past. But he blames continued overcrowding and an improper mixture of residents for the abuse. In addition, he concedes that there is still some abuse of residents by employes.

There have even been reports by employes fearful of revealing their names that other employes have made threats against fellow workers who object to their attacks

on the residents.

That makes it all too obvious that among the improvements which can't be postponed is the formation of a good-sized investigative force at Willowbrook to ferret out any such employes and see that they face charges and, in especially bad cases, criminal prosecution as well.

Parents and families of Willowbrook residents have taken their grievances rightfully to federal court. Is it time to think that a proper move would be to have the federal court appoint an official to oversee conditions at this center where major abuse cases are the highest of any of the 20 centers in the state and assure proper and humanitarian care for those retarded people who are humans and deserve humane treatment?