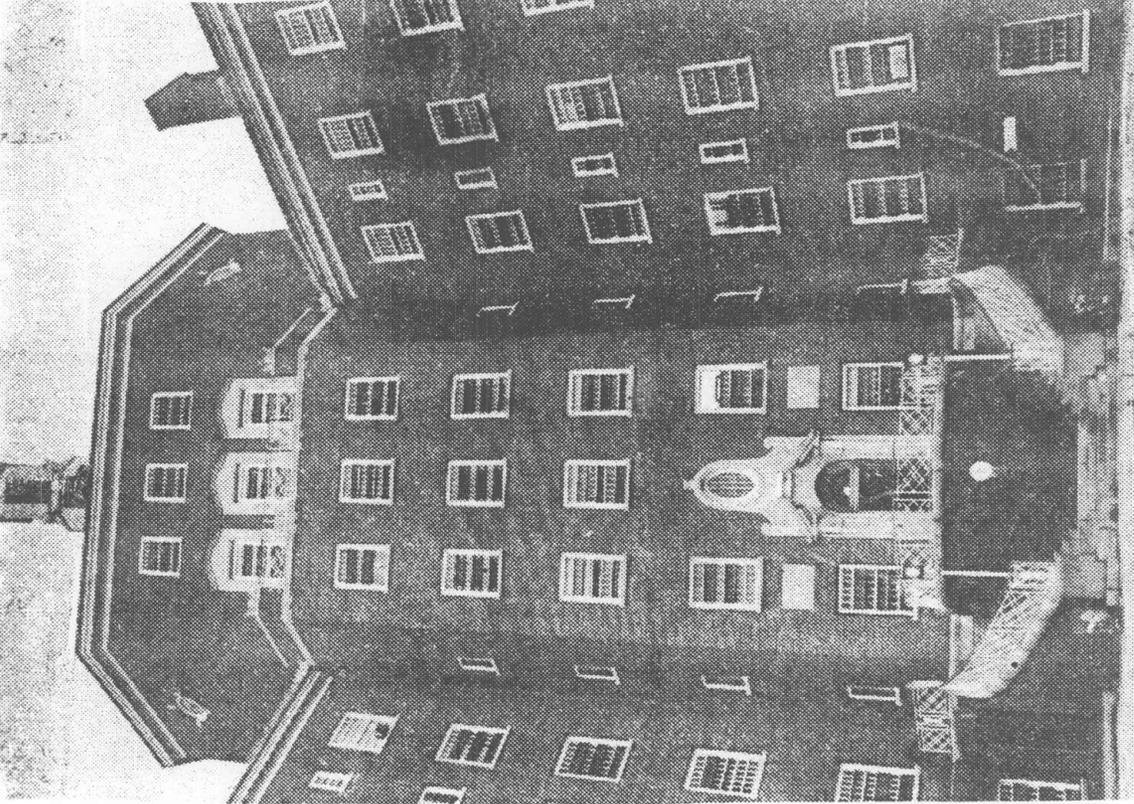


The mountain of Willowbrook endures as laws and men strain to move it



Willowbrook Developmental Center — trying to make the impersonal personal. S.I. Advance Photo by Irving Silvershein

By ROBERT MIRALDI

It was a clear, cool April day in 1975 when Hugh Carey, the Brooklyn Democrat who had been governor for four months, put his signature to a 21-page agreement which may have changed the fate of over 20,000 retarded persons living in state centers.

The agreement — the Willowbrook Consent Decree — between the state and parents with children at Willowbrook Developmental Center was agreed to in federal court and it put the state on notice to do two things: First, state officials agreed to reduce the population of Willowbrook, which was once 6,000, to 250 persons by 1981. Second, the state agreed to develop a series of community residences — halfway houses, hostels, foster homes — for its retarded population.

In 1977, two years after Carey affixed his signature to the precedent-setting agreement, the population of Willowbrook remains at 2,595 and the movement into the community goes slow, slow, slow.

Will Willowbrook EVER be able to reduce its population to 250? And will halfway houses in the community REALLY solve the problem of care for the retarded?

State officials and advocates for the retarded have different answers for those questions. What they are sure of, however, is that population reduction will never take place unless the community placement movement succeeds.

It is a movement plagued with major roadblocks. For example:

Community opposition and fear. Despite cooperation by some communities, other neighborhoods have put up vigorous fights to keep the retarded persons out. Legal test cases are now going on and more are forthcoming. Can a group home be zoned out of a neighborhood?

The courts have not fully answered that one.

Communities fear, it seems, that retarded persons might sexually abuse or physically harm their children although most statistics have shown that the retarded have a lower incidence of criminality and violence than the general population.

Another fear, apparently legitimate, is that property values will plunge in a neighborhood if a group home or halfway house is put on a block. To meet the problem, most group homes are now being put on blocks with commercial stores where property values will be less affected.

Lack of suitable facilities. Since the signing of the Consent Decree, numerous voluntary agencies have been seeking suitable sites to develop halfway houses for the retarded. They have looked without success. One Staten Island group, for example, has looked at over 100 houses and buildings and had not been able to find a site which would meet the architectural requirements of city and state building codes.

Because many retarded persons are non-ambulatory, city and state building codes demand special entrances and exits; special electrical systems and special coverings for walls to prevent fires. One building in St. George was rejected by the state because it was five feet too high.

Lack of suitable services. Part of the demand of the Consent Decree was that each Willowbrook resident, and eventually each retarded person in the state, must have six hours each day of education or programming, like physi-

cal therapy, occupational therapy, or recreational therapy.

When a person is placed in a community residence, a suitable daytime service must be available for that person. The needed services just don't exist, however. And since the decree's signing state officials have worked to provide money and resources to develop the services. The process, has been slow.

The degree of retardation and handicap. The majority of the residents who remain at Willowbrook waiting for community placement are severely retarded and multi-handicapped.

The services needed for them to exist and foster parents, for example, are reluctant to take in a retarded person with multiple handicaps. Many retardation specialists have questioned whether it is possible, or even desirable, to place severely retarded persons in community facilities.

State officials have pledged to reduce Willowbrook's population to 1,500 by the end of 1977. Unless the placement effort starts to speed up, however, an unlikely prospect at this point, Willowbrook will remain overcrowded and plagued by problems.