

Willowbrook residents seek firms to give them business

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Joseph is about 30 years old. He has been living at Willowbrook Developmental Center for 15 years. He can see only partially out of one eye. He is deaf and profoundly retarded.

As he does each weekday, Joseph sits this day all alone at a table. On the table in front of him is a box filled with one-inch long screws. Next to the box is a wooden block with seven nails protruding. Next to each nail is a hole drilled into the wooden block.

Joseph picks up a screw with his left hand, and feels a nail with his right hand. Slowly, he inserts the screw into the hole. The step is repeated until seven screws stand upright next to the seven nails.

It is then that Joseph takes the seven screws and places them into a small plastic container. The container will be sealed eventually, and shipped out to a company that sells boxes of screws from its plant in Elizabeth, N.J.

Joseph, who for years sat on the wards of Willowbrook huddled in corners, barely staying alive, is now a productive member of Willowbrook's nine-month old work activities center.

At the center, 132 Willowbrook residents, all of whom are profoundly retarded, some physically handicapped, come each day to work, assembling boxes of screws, putting together pens, packaging various health-related items.

"We're just starting to find out what the potential of some residents is," Jack Harrington, supervisor of the workshop, says. "Some of the residents amaze us with what they can do."

Harrington points to resident Larry who is in his 20's, profoundly retarded, blind, and partially deaf. Larry takes metal bolt accessories out of a box, places them on a wooden block until he has enough to fill a plastic container.

It is a small feat, except when you consider that Larry has an IQ that may be below 20. Previously it was believed that profoundly retarded persons were capable of only limited motor skills.

Now, in fact, says Harrington and Dr.



From despair to usefulness

While improvements at Willowbrook Developmental Center have been slow, human progress has certainly been made with, for example, this resident who is blind and profoundly retarded. Despite his handicaps, this resident has been taught to count out and package screws for a money-making workshop on the grounds. For details and other photographs see page 14.

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While staffer Tony Campisi watches, a Willowbrook resident uses a heat sealer to seal packages of curlers that have been put together by other Willowbrook residents.

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Louis Siegel, overall director of the workshop, Willowbrook is seeking contracts for more difficult packaging products. Currently the workshop has five contracts.

Some of the residents in the workshop are finding the current projects boring. Packaging screws and folding sanitary belts, for example, have become too easy. Thus, the program's supervisors are looking elsewhere for more difficult projects.

More perplexing, Willowbrook, offi-

cial are finding, is locating companies who are willing to contract with the state. Harrington points to difficult economic conditions as one roadblock to securing contracts with private companies.

But also, he says, "you have to sell yourself to companies."

"We're a business, not a charity. We're not looking for a handout. We have a business here. We have deadlines to meet and we are meeting them," says Harrington, who has been a direc-

tor of other similar workshops in private agencies on Staten Island.

The need for additional contracts will become urgent shortly when the program expands to include at least 50 more residents. "We're making changes here to accommodate more people," says Dr. Siegel, pointing to the warehouse which is being rehabilitated to accommodate the workshops on two floors.

"What we need now," Dr. Siegel says, "is companies to offer us contracts."



Therapy aide Nancy Florillo, left, helps resident Larry, who is blind and partially deaf, assemble a package of bolt accessories. The wood block in front of Larry helps him count the correct number of screws.



Willowbrook residents assemble sanitary belts which will be packaged and sold to private companies. The residents are paid for their work.



Willowbrook staffer Emily Ross, left, helps a resident use a telephone which was donated by the Bell Telephone Co. For most residents, the use of a phone is a new experience.