

Willowbrook boss asks job transfer



Dr. Levester Cannon, director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, asks for a transfer to another job in the state mental hygiene system.

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Willowbrook Developmental Center, the troubled state institution for the retarded, may soon lose another director — its fifth in less than three years.

Dr. Levester Cannon, the Schenectady, N.Y., educator who has directed the 2,500-bed facility for 10 months, has asked for a transfer to another job in the state's mental hygiene bureaucracy.

In response to questions yesterday, Cannon said he had discussed with officials in Albany the possibility of a transfer to another job in the state mental hygiene system and he said he had inquired if his holding the Willowbrook job would bar his transfer. He was told it wouldn't.

Cannon said yesterday he was "open minded" about staying at Willowbrook or going elsewhere. Calling the Willowbrook job "difficult at best,"

brook job "very difficult," Cannon said the facility "doesn't lend itself to a director being able to be in complete charge."

Cannon cited the numerous advisory and "vested interest" groups, like the unions and parents, with which he has to deal to make decisions.

Although Cannon declined to discuss aspects of his relationship with mental hygiene officials in Albany, numerous sources have said that Cannon has expressed displeasure with his inability to make key decisions about the management of Willowbrook.

Despite being the day-to-day director of the 387-acre center, Cannon reportedly has had to defer to Deputy Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin on many major decisions. One source called their relationship "difficult at best."

When Cannon took the \$43,500-a-year

job on July 15, vowing he would be at Willowbrook "till the job is done," he asserted to a reporter and to parent groups that he would not be a "puppet" for Coughlin. "I'm no one's puppet," Cannon said.

"The way it has turned out," one source intimately familiar with Willowbrook's operation said, Cannon "has had to take much of the daily abuse, much of the blame and yet he hasn't been able to make decisions."

Rumors about Cannon's departure have been floating around Willowbrook for almost two months, but Cannon denied last month that he had any intention of leaving. He conceded that changes were going slowly and pointed out with a sigh that Willowbrook "is

Frustrated Willowbrook boss asks transfer, says he's hamstrung

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still the world's largest institution." In one interview Cannon said: "Eighteen hours a day is all I can give. I have serious questions if I can keep up that pace." According to a source in the Department of Mental Hygiene, it was about two months ago — after eight months at Willowbrook — that Cannon asked for a transfer.

May 3 at a meeting of the Willowbrook Board of Visitors, Cannon, who has a doctoral degree in education, told the members he had asked for a transfer. He also initiated a discussion about the possibility that the state may ask the federal government to intervene in the administration of Willowbrook. Yesterday Cannon called such discussions "very far-fetched."

A spokesman for Coughlin vigorously denied that there has been any discussion among state officials about handing over the state center to a federal court. Willowbrook is under a federal court order to make radical changes at the center and to reduce its population to 250 by 1981. The changes and the population reduction have been going slowly.

Three members of the Board of Visitors, all asking not to be identified, insisted that Cannon had initiated a brief discussion about the possibility of federal intervention. One board member said Cannon questioned if the state could find another person to direct Willowbrook.

"Cannon said no one would touch the job with a 10-foot pole," a board member said.

One attorney who has been a participant in the Willowbrook case in federal court said it might be a "shrewd" move for the state to place the running of Willowbrook in the lap of Federal Judge John R. Bartels, who could, of course, refuse to allow such a move.

More likely, however, is that Bartels

would appoint a master — someone with expertise in mental retardation who would run the institution and tell state officials how to proceed.

A master is seldom used by federal courts, according to most observers, and in hearings about Willowbrook on May 11 Judge Bartels said he would not like to see too much federal intervention in Willowbrook. "I don't want people to fear the federal court taking over too much," he said.

The spokesman for Coughlin, who confirmed that Cannon had requested a transfer, said he was seeking the director's job at the Westchester Developmental Services in White Plains, N.Y. Westchester has no institution for the retarded but has instead a series of community facilities.

A search committee there has narrowed its decision to three persons, and Cannon is one of the candidates, the spokesman said. A final decision will be made by Mental Hygiene Commissioner Lawrence C. Kolb.

Ever since the scandal about conditions at Willowbrook was revealed in 1972, there has been a turnover of directors at the high-pressure center which has become a symbol of all that is wrong with care for the retarded in the country.

Dr. Miodrag Ristich was Willowbrook's director from 1972 to October 1974 when the 36-year-old Yugoslavian-born psychiatrist was forced out of the job and into a state research post. Ristich had been criticized for his lack of managerial ability — a charge he denied vigorously.

Following Ristich was James A. Forde, a deputy commissioner who stayed at Willowbrook for five months while a nationwide search took place for an management specialist to handle Willowbrook.

Harold Piepenbrink of Chicago was tabbed for the job, but the 45-year-old Piepenbrink had the post for about nine months when he was stricken with cancer. He died in December 1976.

Deputy Commissioner Coughlin then took the center's reins from March to July 1976, when Cannon was handed the job. Cannon, like Piepenbrink, said he would not take the pressure-packed Willowbrook job without assurances from Albany that he would have freedom to make decisions the center.

Despite assurances, however, Cannon has not had his way.

In December, Cannon was set to im-

plement a major reorganization of the administrative structure at Willowbrook, similar to one implemented by Piepenbrink. Coughlin mixed the plan, and reportedly Cannon was miffed at the deputy commissioner.

Additionally, sources say, when the state and parent groups negotiated a series of major changes for the center, including a takeover of a number of buildings by a private agency, Cannon was not even a part of the negotiation process.

Asked about difference with Coughlin, Cannon said it would be "inappropriate" for him to comment.