

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.