



Dr. Levester Cannon, in striped shirt, informs his administrative staff of his intentions to resign as director of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

# Willowbrook boss quits for post in Ohio

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Willowbrook Developmental Center, the troubled institution for the retarded, yesterday lost its fifth director in three years when Dr. Levester Cannon resigned to become the first black commissioner of the Ohio mental health department.

But the departure of the 42-year-old educator, announced jointly by Ohio and New York State officials, came as no

surprise. For five months, rumors had been circulating that Dr. Cannon, hamstrung at Willowbrook, was looking for a job where he'd be allowed to manage and exercise control.

Cannon had complained privately on numerous occasions that he could do neither at the world's largest institution because Department of Mental Hygiene officials in Albany were bound to review his every move.

But, in announcing his resignation to his administrative staff yesterday, Cannon was at pains to avoid discussion of his relationship with Albany officials.

He told administrators that being director of Willowbrook was "very difficult," but contended he leaves with

PAGE 1  
OF  
2 PAGES

"good feelings" and a fuller understanding of the institution's problems.

When Cannon took the \$43,500-a-year job 13 months ago, he said he would be "no one's puppet." He vowed to stay on as Willowbrook's director "till the job is done."

Cannon told his staff yesterday that the job is far from done, although he spoke of "substantial progress" made during his tenure to improve conditions at the 2,400-bed institution.

"Few people understand," Cannon said, "the complexities and difficulties of operating a facility so large and complex as Willowbrook."

"We've made substantial progress toward complying with an intricate legal document, and I hope the next director, whoever he is, will continue to try to move Willowbrook ahead"

In an interview later, Cannon admitted that change at the institution, under a court order to reduce its population to 250 by 1981, has moved slowly. "But anybody who expects radical changes overnight is not looking at the reality of Willowbrook," he said.

Cannon, speaking in the soft, even tones that are the trademark of his style, added that his new job, as a commissioner of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, will afford him the opportunity to return to the Midwest, where he was raised and has family, pursuing a "policy-making job."

Cannon is the first black man in Ohio's history to get a top post with the mental health department. He was one of 30 candidates for the job of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Division commissioner, a spokesman for the agency said yesterday.

He is expected to assume the \$41,000-a-year post one month from today, and will stay on at Willowbrook for two weeks, he said, to "clean up loose ends."

In Ohio, Connor will be in charge of eight state institutions housing approximately 6,000 retarded persons and of 400 community facilities.

Just as soon as Cannon's plans to leave were made public yesterday, parents of Willowbrook's retarded and others familiar with the institution's workings renewed criticism of how it is run.

They said Cannon leaves Willowbrook no better, and perhaps worse, than he found it.

Genevieve Kaen, president of Willowbrook's Benevolent Society, decried conditions on the grounds of the 387-acre developmental center and charged that residents are being exposed to "a dangerous setup."

"There are no solutions to Willowbrook," Mrs. Kamen said, "no feelings for the residents and no answers."

A check of one facility, Building 14, seemed to confirm in part Mrs. Kamen's contentions. In this building yesterday, plumbing was broken, sinks stopped up and cigarettes, not allowed on the wards, stubbed out in the carpet.

Many parents, including Mrs. Kamen, said Dr. Cannon was an ambitious director and that the administrative problems that marked his tenure were endemic to the job itself.

Chris Hanson, an attorney who has been involved in Willowbrook affairs since the early '70s, suggested that one way out of the Willowbrook dilemma might be to hire a federal ombudsman — a master appointed by the court to tell the state how to proceed.

He said such a move would be considered by parents, who are also thinking about bringing a contempt motion against top state officials for failure to implement the terms of the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Degree.

A spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene, responding to Cannon's resignation and to reports of deteriorating conditions at Willowbrook, said: "These are problems with state institutions; we are trying, but change comes slowly."

The spokesman said a search committee will be appointed by the mental health agency to find a replacement for the 42-year-old educator who previously was a regional mental hygiene commissioner.

He said an acting director would be named "immediately so that there will be continuity of direction." Sources said Dr. Cannon had recommended Dr. Philip Ziring, now deputy director of treatment services at Willowbrook, to be the acting director. His appointment would be subject, however, to the approval of Thomas A. Coughlin, deputy director of the mental hygiene bureaucracy.

Ever since the scandal about conditions at Willowbrook was revealed in 1972, there has been a turnover of directors at the institution at an alarming rate.

Dr. Miodrag Ristich was Willowbrook's director from 1972 to October 1974, when the psychiatrist was forced out of the job and into a research post. Ristich had been criticized for his lack of managerial ability — which he denied.

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

Harold Piepenbrink of Chicago was picked. Piepenbrink had the post about nine months when he was stricken with cancer. He died in December 1975.

Deputy Commissioner Coughlin took over and gave the job to Dr. Cannon in July 1976.

Cannon, like Piepenbrink, refused to accept the job without assurances from Albany that he would have freedom to make decisions at the center.

Despite the assurances, Cannon did not.

A graduate of Wiley College in Mar-

shall, Tex., and the recipient of a doctorate in education, Cannon brought to the Willowbrook position years of experience as an administrator and an expert in mental retardation management. Neither apparently helped.

Dr. Cannon, who with his wife and two children resides in Schenectady, said yesterday he thinks the next director should be someone who will be able to deal with "numerous vested interest groups while staying apprised of day-to-day operations."

"It's a very hard job and I encountered problems, but we're dealing with a place that doesn't change in a day," Cannon said.

The spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene said that a nationwide search will get under way shortly, adding that "there'll be pressure on us to have another director there within a three-month framework."

PAGE 2  
OF  
2 PAGES